Producing and Living the City in Vietnam

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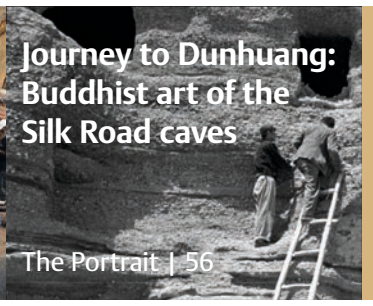
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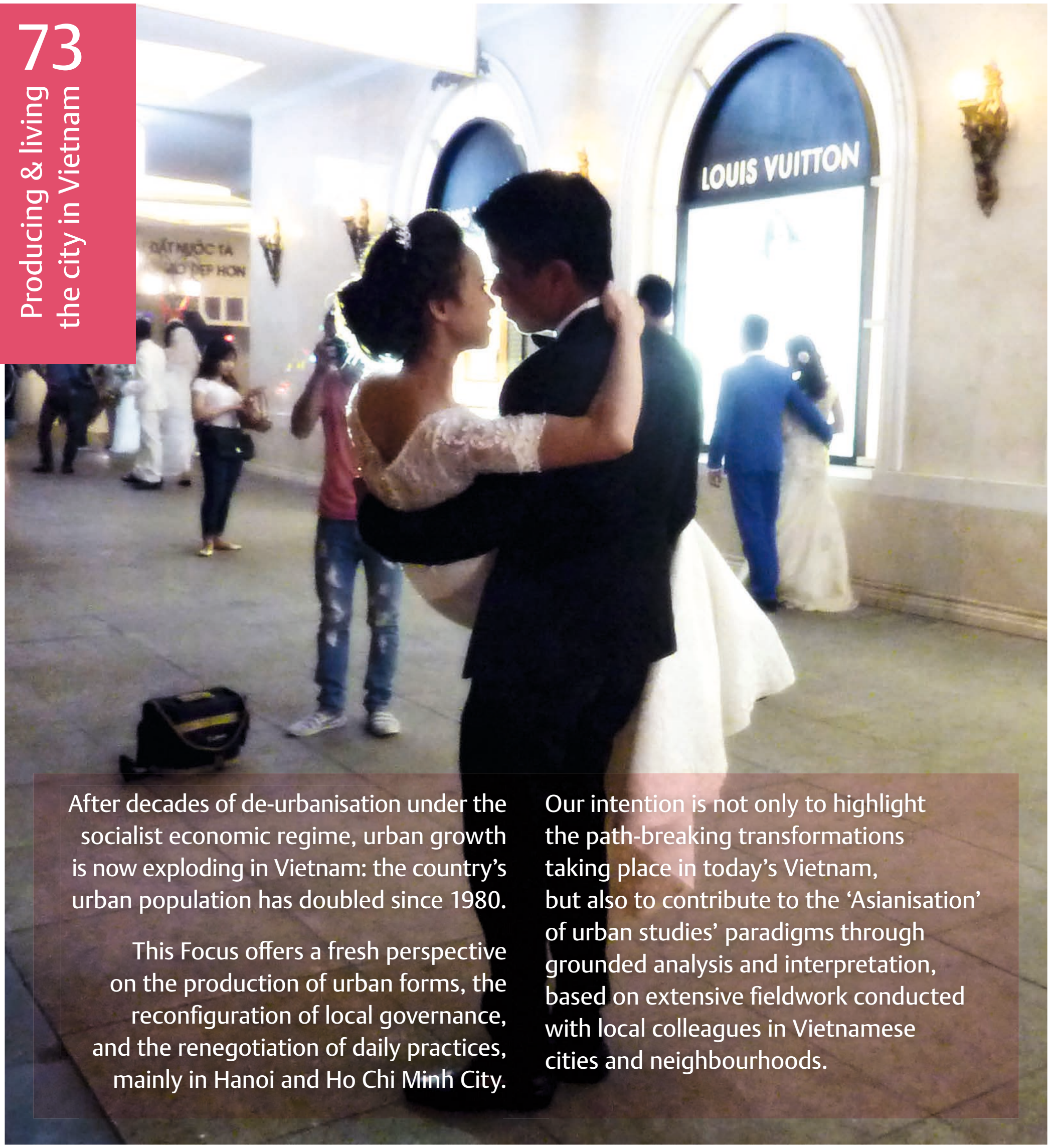
Producing & living the city in Vietnam



After decades of de-urbanisation under the socialist economic regime, urban growth is now exploding in Vietnam: the country's urban population has doubled since 1980.

This Focus offers a fresh perspective on the production of urban forms, the reconfiguration of local governance, and the renegotiation of daily practices, mainly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Our intention is not only to highlight the path-breaking transformations taking place in today's Vietnam, but also to contribute to the 'Asianisation' of urban studies' paradigms through grounded analysis and interpretation, based on extensive fieldwork conducted with local colleagues in Vietnamese cities and neighbourhoods.

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A couple drinking sugarcane juice at Me Tri (The Manor), a new urban area west of Hanoi (photo by Vincent Bertholon).

Producing & living the city in Vietnam

Engaging with the urban field in Vietnam: crossing approaches

In a world where more than 50% of the population lives in cities,[1] Vietnam and its current 34% of urban dwellers[2] remains associated with rurality in the global imaginary. But this last figure should be put into perspective: after decades of de-urbanisation under the socialist regime the national urban growth is now exploding; the country's urban population has doubled since 1980, with an official average growth of 3.4% per year.[3] Beyond this steady demographic development, urbanised areas multiplied by 4 between 1995 and 2010.[4] Most of the urban growth takes place in and around Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), even though secondary cities are also engaged in a rebalancing process.[5] Today these two main metropolises of the country have respectively 7 and 7.9 million inhabitants.[6] In addition, since the introduction of *đổi mới* reforms in the mid-1980s,[7] cities have been officially recognised as the engine of national economic growth by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), which leads the country.

In this renewed context, our *Focus* offers a fresh perspective on the production of urban forms, the reconfiguration of local management, and the renegotiation of daily practices in Vietnamese cities. Our intention is not only to highlight the path-breaking transformations taking place in Vietnam today, but also to contribute to the 'Asianisation' of urban studies paradigms through grounded analysis and interpretation,[8] and to discuss an alternative theoretical framework, based on extensive fieldwork in Vietnamese cities and neighbourhoods.

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Engaging with the urban field in Vietnam: crossing approaches *continued*

Unfolding the layers of the Vietnam urban fabric

If contemporary urban transformations are taking place in increasingly globalised contexts, they should also be understood by considering the long-term urban history that explains the distinctiveness of the Vietnamese metropolises' 'art of being global'.[9] Furthermore, their contemporary 'openness' echoes the previous international links these cities kept during the historical contexts of Chinese Diaspora trade, French colonisation and the socialist bloc-cooperation period. Thus, after experiencing colonisation, decades of war, socialism and de-urbanisation,[10] followed by the national reunification of 1976 and *đổi mới* reforms, different Vietnamese cities reveal different urban trajectories.

In that regard, the literature has contrasted Hanoi and HCMC for a long while: HCMC is usually depicted as the country's liberal and international vanguard, while Hanoi is often associated with bureaucracy and Party enhanced control. Hanoi, as the national capital city, is indeed the place where decisions are taken, while HCMC is considered to be the potential economic engine of the country. The different places they occupy in the urban hierarchy continue to influence the understanding of Vietnam's urbanisation, even though this dichotomy is becoming less significant these days. The two metropolises are now engaged in a similar trend of opening-up and metropolisation, which leads to a progressive 'convergence process'. Thus, while concentrating mainly on these two leading cities – thereby also reflecting the reality of the academic production today, as far as urban Vietnam is concerned – this Focus will go beyond the simple juxtaposition of two competing cities, by highlighting the complementarities of their two 'worlding paths'.[11]

Metropolisation: towards a reading of the 'worlding paths' of Vietnamese cities

With the adoption of a 'socialist-oriented market economy' and the opening-up to international financial flows, major Vietnamese cities, as well as secondary ranking cities like Danang located in economic development corridors,[12] are stimulated by a common metropolisation process.

In this *Focus,* metropolisation is understood as a process that affects a city both in its forms and functions, and is characterised by a concentration of population, activities, and wealth. This phenomenon cannot, however, be reduced to its demographic dimension only. Its originality relates to the diversification of the activities, to the concentration of strategic economic functions, and to the attractiveness of and accessibility to communication networks at various scales. In particular, metropolisation integrates cities into the networks of the global economy.[13] While they take part in this tendency, Asian cities display specific features. The *desakota* pattern defined by McGee suggests that metropolisation leads to the assembling of territories that combine agricultural and non-agricultural activities.[14] In addition, by using cheap means of transport, such as motorbikes, transportation of goods and people is facilitated between inner cities and their fringes.

In Hanoi and HCMC the early signs of metropolisation appeared with the arrival of the first Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) at the beginning of the 1990s. Though buildings of more than ten storeys were already built in HCMC during the 1960s and 1970s, Vietnamese cities generally remained quite 'low', until the FDI triggered the construction of the first high-rise buildings. This paved the way to the verticalisation and 'super-sizing' of the city. The construction of the New World Hotel in HCMC in 1991, and the Hanoi Tower in 1996 (that combines service apartments, hotel, offices and retail functions), embodied the first international functions and vertical shapes. On the outskirts, FDI materialised through the construction of rescaled industrial zones and factories (see the article by *Trần Khắc Minh* in this Focus section). For instance, the Japanese firm Honda settled its first motorbike assemblage chain in the North of Hanoi nearby the international airport in 1997.

In addition, urban sprawl has progressed rapidly. In the last 20 years, in both cities, an average of 1,000 hectares per year of agricultural land has been urbanised. As a result, the inner cities and their outskirts (i.e., the peri-urban areas) were densified. Noteworthy landmarks of this trend are the experimental residential areas, known as 'new urban areas' *(Khu đô thi mới),* which city authorities initiated in the early 1990s. Both Hanoi and HCMC started to develop their iconic projects in 1996, with Ciputra in Hanoi and Saigon South in HCMC. These two projects represent the kick-start of large scale urban projects in Vietnamese cities (over 400 hectares) located at the cities' outskirts, where private and foreign investors and developers are involved (see article by *Segard*). Furthermore, there has clearly been a shift from an organic growth of the city to 'project-based development' (see article by *Gibert and Phạm Thái Sơn*).[15]

In this context, the construction of new mass rapid transit systems became a major issue (see article by *Musil* and *Vương Khánh Toàn*). Furthermore, while cities deal with planned adjustment phases to frame the construction of modern economic infrastructures, urban spontaneous developments also continue.

A reordering of stakeholders: urbanisation as a political process

Spaces are changing; so too are the stakeholders. Even though the economic transition and international opening-up have been orchestrated by the Party, the Regime has evolved, influenced both from the 'outside' (regional powers, international donors, Western countries) and from the 'inside' (intellectuals, Party branches, religious groups, inhabitants, etc.). The current production of the city, governance issues and power relations, all illustrate the complexification of the political, economic and social life of the country.

Stakeholders involved in planning, construction, acquisition of land or renovation of urban cores are much greater in numbers nowadays, and they keep diversifying. Public authorities have kept hold of the driving seat, controlling the land use system, investments licences or Official Development Assistance targets. However, they are now being challenged. On the one hand, private entrepreneurs (both domestic - notably the recomposing State-Owned Enterprise - and international) have growing expectations in terms of land availability, flexibility, incentives and enabling business environment. On the other hand, inhabitants are progressively being emancipated from rigid structures of control and mobilisation. Thus, they now participate in the production of the city 'from the bottom-up' and contribute to the emergence of a new urban society, with the wish to benefit from the country's development in general.

Even though the narrative of 'the rights to the city' is not claimed, people are negotiating, questioning policy goals, encroaching the rules every day to have a say in their city's evolution, to be recognised as urban citizens, and to participate, even on the margins, in decision-making. Thus, power relations and structures are transforming as a result of every stakeholder's attempt to find his or her place in an evolving system, through economic competition, negotiation or protest. In fact, everyone contributes to these changes – no matter their social status, gender, origin or age – because their influence also lies in daily practices, ritual customs (see the articles by *Pannier* and by *Ngô Thị Thu Trang*), or leisure activities (see the article by *Peyvel* and *Võ Sáng Xuân Lan*) that are not always politicised, but which do nevertheless shape the global evolution of the country and society.

Practical development choices, growth policies and urban models have to be formulated and developed by the authorities. Concretely, the Party-State faces both short-term and long-term challenges: housing production and service provision, the climate change threat to river delta regions (already subject to floods), congestion issues and pollution, heritage preservation (see the article on urban heritage preservation policies in this *Focus* section) and promotion of 'modern' urban products, such as shopping malls or condominiums.

What is crucial now for the Regime is to decide how to manage developments, which arrangements to adopt, and how to mediate between economic interests and political /social stability. In other words, how to make the system work? For the authorities, the objective is to keep control and power over urbanisation while largely delegating, or privatising, the production of the city.

A street scene in Phú Mỹ Hưng, a new urban area in HCMC, with the Bitexco Tower, a city landmark, in the background (photo by Marie Gibert).

A view from the corner of Lý Chính Thắng and Trần Quốc Thảo streets in HCMC (photo by Marie Gibert).

It is important to bear in mind that the Regime's stability relies on its ability – more or less – to ensure growth and to improve living conditions for a majority of its people. The Party-State carries a strong developmentalist discourse and its members position themselves as 'state-craft thinkers', who have to, and can, turn the country from a 'latecomer state' into an 'advanced country', by making adjustments inspired by exogenous Western or Asian models.[16] But growth has slowed down and inequalities are increasing, especially in urban contexts, leading many to question the legitimacy of the 'socialist and communist' Regime.

So far, pragmatism and flexibility have been key to mitigate shocks and react to emerging demands, internal or external, from the local 'civil society' or from the private sector. The Party-State has demonstrated its ability to adapt and react subtly by postponing unpopular or sensitive reforms, by co-opting potential sources of opposition, by adopting new rules or by taking a step back from urban or peri-urban projects that provoke local conflicts.

Beyond the 'black box'

Walking through the city, from the coffee shop on the corner of the street, past private homes, official offices, city departments and police stations, our findings result from extensive fieldwork, exploring urban and peri-urban areas, engaging with people, and producing a collective effort to circulate information and perspectives.

Beyond the documentation of Vietnamese urban mutations in their various forms, this *Focus* also wants to offer a renewed perspective on urban studies' tools, from the specific context of Vietnam today. Following the track of the Southern Turn,[17] we have strived to tackle the inadequacy of the Western conceptual framework in urban studies. Applied out of its context, this hegemonical toolbox of globalized urbanism has become a 'black box',[18] invisibilising the specificities of Vietnamese cities. We therefore explore the possibility of transcending 'the West and the Rest' categorisation, inherited from colonial times.

Indeed, Vietnamese cities undergo combined forms of rigid categorisation: economically speaking, they are 'emerging cities', that is to say threatening for European and North American countries;[19] from a socio-spatial perspective, they are 'Southern' and 'developing' cities;[20] and politically they are considered to be 'opening-up', designated with the prefix 'post', to indicate both the end of colonialism and socialism. For all these reasons, the recurring discourse of 'transition' is dominant in the analyses of the production of contemporary Vietnamese cities.[21]

This *Focus* intends to show how the intersectionality of Vietnamese cities is fertile ground for rethinking the position, methods and concepts of the researcher – especially when he or she is not Vietnamese. The making of this project was therefore thought to disrupt the 'black box'. As a group, we were particularly keen on a symmetrical research practice in a post-colonial perspective. This involves decentring the researcher's gaze to balance the power plays that govern the production of knowledge. We therefore sought to work *with* – rather than *instead of* – Vietnamese researchers. To do that, we functioned either in pairs (comprising both a French and a Vietnamese researcher) or we put French and Vietnamese perspectives, on objects such as heritages and rituals, side by side. This innovative working process allowed for a continued presence in the field over many years, for shared fieldwork, contradictory readings of the findings, and for co-writing processes. We were therefore able to overcome challenging practical issues such as the scarcity of statistical data, accessibility of sensitive places and stakeholders, and matters of understanding local narratives, thus contributing to a comprehensive approach to the city, and articulating macro and micro scale analyses.

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Understanding the Vietnamese urban fabric from the inside

Narrow lane, small street,
my home is there
In my dreams,
I still remember this ... [1]

Once low, dense and organic cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) are now engaged in a steady-paced verticalisation process, especially in the new urbanised areas flourishing at their edges *(khu đô thị mới)*. But beyond iconic new urban projects and glittering business districts, the everyday city production still takes place in the interior of their specific urban pattern, namely their alleyway neighbourhoods.

Marie Gibert and Phạm Thái Sơn

Above:
An alleyway in HCMC (district 3) in the morning (photo by Marie Gibert).

THESE ANCIENT NEIGHBOURHOODS are characterised by the 'smallness' of their plot division and by the very high density of population they foster (more than 80.000 inhabitants/km^2 in some central areas of HCMC; in district 10 for instance). Although lacking official recognition from the urban authorities, the urban network of alleyways still houses about 85% of city dwellers in HCMC, and 88% in Hanoi.[2] As such, it remains an important ingredient of the Vietnamese urban identity. Reading the contemporary production of metropolitan spaces through this lens provides insights not only into the evolution of the inherited spatial apparatus, but also into the social and political dimensions of the urbanity. It allows one to embrace the ethnographical turn in metropolitan studies that Ananya Roy and Aiwha Ong call for, in order to fully integrate "the diversity of urban dreams, project and practices [...] in emerging world regions" in the field of urban theory.[3]

Hanoi's alleyways: the evidence of a rural palimpsest

The widespread existence and the typical small width of alleyways in Hanoi are not an accidental phenomenon; they are the historical result of the urban development process. Most of Hanoi's alleyways have been developing based on the spatial structure of ancient rural villages *(làng),* after some structural and dimensional restoration. The main alleyways were established from the ancient road pattern leading to the village hamlets *(thôn):* the pathway between ancient rice fields or along the edge of large ponds, once existing almost everywhere in ancient villages. The smallest alleys were created more recently, during the densification process of urban villages; either through organisational subdivisions, or through the auto-division of original private land.[4]

In the beginning of the 1990s, Hanoi's local authorities distributed land – including vacant lots, lakes, ponds and rice fields – surrounding the city centre among public groups. The receiving organisations then divided these areas into several single plots of 30-40m^2 and allocated them to their staff. The small alleyways were designed as straight passages, of approximately 2-2.5m wide, between the plots of land. The second mechanism mentioned above is the common phenomenon of auto-division of private land in urbanised villages surrounding the city. With the construction of new homes, or the need for familial financial resources (garnered through selling land), original land owners divide their garden, court or pond into many small plots of 30-50m^2, leaving small passages of only 1-1.5m wide. Such alleys can be winding or straight, depending on the number of times a plot has been divided, and the division method of subsequent owners.

The mechanisms of alleyway development, together with the city-wide phenomenon of illegal encroachments by house construction, explain the extremely narrow width of the alleys. In Hanoi, 90% of the alleys are less than 4m wide, with a significant disparity among the different urban areas: the further from the city centre, the larger the alleyways. As a result, most alleys are inaccessible to cars.

HCMC's alleyways: the pragmatism of city dwellers during uncertain historical times

In HCMC, the very dense network of alleyways was born mainly out of the city dwellers' pragmatism during uncertain times. Only the colonial grid-pattern covering district 1, a part of district 3, and the historical structure of the Chinese neighbourhood of *Chợ Lớn,* at the West of district 5, were planned and calibrated during the 19th century. At that period the street networks were considered to be the matrix of the urbanisation process. But beyond the production of these historical neighbourhoods, urban growth took place following a spontaneous and linear logic, first guided by the main trading axes, and later by a process of densification.[5]

The further we get from these structuring main streets, the more random the alleyway grid becomes, revealing the historical interweaving between the planned and the spontaneous in HCMC's urban production. The different morphological patterns of the alleyways answered the variety of local situations: like a palimpsest, their spatial organisation often reveals the ancient frame of rural paths, paddy fields or embankment systems, that structured the territory many decades ago. As a result, HCMC's urban structure is notably based on the juxtaposition of different composite urban fabrics.

Each alleyway benefits from strong interactions with its adjacent plots of lands. This spatial apparatus constitutes the basic unit of the urban matrix. The heart of this apparatus comprises the 'shop house', today often reinterpreted as the 'tube-house' *(nhà ống).* Its shape is rectangular, very narrow and deep (around 3-4m wide and 15-25m deep), perpendicular to the street, onto which it opens directly (on one side only), and it occupies the entire plot of land. The high prevalence of this urban form helps to explain the high density that HCMC fosters, despite its low morphological profile.

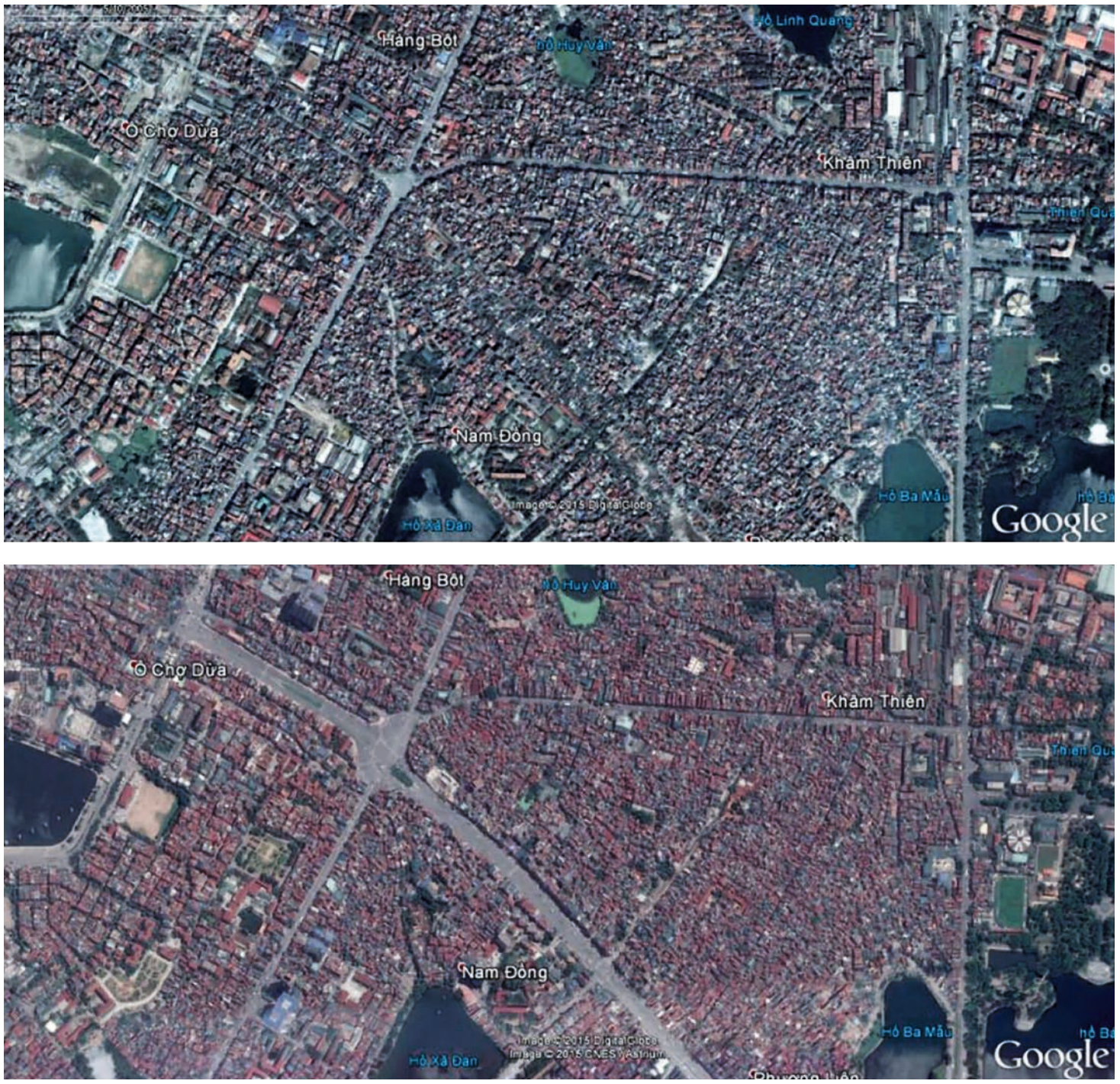
Both in Hanoi and HCMC, low-rise urban fabric allows for direct street access to a maximum of residents. Indeed, trading functions have historically driven the format of urban housing in Vietnam. Alleyways directly connected to commercial streets are the most valued. Furthermore, within this urban texture, the different blocks and neighbourhoods are not structured around any central plaza. The idea of centrality is linearly embodied by the main alleyway, which constitutes the backbone of the local structure and which is the most socially and commercially dynamic place in the neighbourhood.
In Vietnamese spatial practices, the built environment itself is structured by and according to the street: it is the distance to the street that orders the layout and the functions associated with each room in the house, through a succession of ranked thresholds. The entrance room, which opens directly onto the street, constitutes the pivot of this spatial apparatus: it allows an efficient interface between public and private, commercial and domestic. Thus, Vietnamese alleyways offer a relevant example of an integrated urban apparatus, where interrelations between the form of places and their practices are obvious.

Alleyway households as self-organised communities

Alleyway neighbourhoods are divided into several resident groups *(tổ dân phố)* of 50-100 persons. Each group is led by a head person, who represents the neighbourhood at the ward level. The groups organise monthly meetings, in which they inform residents of administrative news, discuss local policies, and mediate household conflicts. Thus, alleyway households proactively participate in the management of their daily lives and the development of their surrounding space and landscape.

A good example of the willingness of urban residents to participate in the production of their space is the local project that (re)constructed alley pavements and underground sewers. To carry out the project, each household contributed to the budget; so too did the Ward People's Committee, in accordance with the principle *Nhà nước và nhân dân cùng làm* [the state and people work together]. Resident groups relied on their 'head person' to supervise the work, but each resident also kept an eye on work done in front of their own home. Most residents were satisfied with the outcome and the quality of work; more so than with projects that are totally financed by the public sector, in which cases they do not have any right of supervision or participation. Another example of urban

A view from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City alleyway neighbourhoods



Hanoi's alleyway neighborhoods facing the building of Ring Road No1 (Ô Chợ Dừa and Xã Đàn sections) between 2005 (above) and 2015 (below). Courtesy Google Earth.

self-management can be found in a small alley on *Giải Phóng* street in Hanoi. Residents were unhappy with their very narrow alley (only 1.2m), and so decided to expand its width to 2m by all contributing a part of their private land.

These examples confirm that urban residents are not passive actors in the city production, but active participants in urban morphology, the evolution of technical services and the creation of everyday public space. Daily life in the alleyways illustrates very well the traditional Vietnamese saying *bán anh em xa mua láng giềng gần* [selling far brothers and buying near neighbours]. The intimate interactions among alley residents create a strong sense of community and a shared memory, as Le Vinh describes in his famous song "Hanoi and me", quoted at the top of this article.

Alleyways as vibrant public spaces

A detour via a semantics study allows for a better understanding of the particular concept of the street within Vietnamese culture. The Vietnamese language provides a categorisation of the world characterised by the use of classifiers for nouns, according to whether they are living things (con) or inanimate objects *(cái).* Interestingly, the common word for 'street' is *con đường* and not *cái đường.* In Vietnamese, the street is perceived as an active being and a 'circulated space', shaped by the different types of traffic flows that go through it everyday. This notion acknowledges that social practices contribute to the street's identity and take part in its metamorphoses.

Moreover, streets are considered to be resources intuitively used to meet various needs. Not only is the alleyway a place of business, but residents also treat their doorstep and street as a natural extension of their own home.[6] As a result, various domestic activities, such as cooking, doing one's laundry, installing ornamental plants or burning votive objects, take place in the alleyways of Hanoi and HCMC. Trading on the street or on one's doorstep has also been one of the most shared ways to earn a living in post-reform Vietnam, a time at which many people lost their state sector positions. The renewal of the private sector in the Vietnamese economy is thus strongly characterised by small businesses. The capacity alleyways have to welcome such a diversity of activities can be explained through a temporal analysis: the rotation of each type of activity during the day allows for increased access to the street for a larger number of urban dwellers.

Beyond the antagonism of the public/private duo inherited from the Western conception of urban spaces, Vietnamese alleyways offer the richness of the buffer zone of its intermediate semi-public spaces, at the interface of the tube-house and the street. In Vietnam, the level of publicness of a space varies depending on the time of day, and day of year. This remark invites us to re-think the notion of public space from the perspective of Hanoi and HCMC alleyways, in order to fully integrate the urban practices and conceptualisations of the global South in the field of urban theory.[7] The anthropological exploration of the daily functioning of ordinary alleyways also provides an invitation to acknowledge the social value of ephemeral public spaces, which are constantly renewed by residents' uses and interchanges. These fluid and shifting spaces allow for a great reversibility in urban functions and illustrate the idea of the street as a 'capital for experimentation' and the fruit of a social agreement continuously renewed over time, which allows both for the permanence of a spatial form and the modification of its parallel uses.[8]

Alleyways in the course of the metropolisation process: current challenges and ongoing mutations

In the course of *metropolisation,* the alleyways of Hanoi and HCMC tend to more and more be considered as necessary connectors within larger road systems.[9] This trend leads to a progressive disconnect between circulatory and residential functions, which used to be the dominant frame of the Vietnamese urban fabric.

After decades of *laissez-faire* regarding the city growth, the metropolitan authorities have come up with new priorities, beginning with the need for traffic fluidity, which reveals the rise in power of a neo-functionalism perspective concerning urban planning in Vietnam today. Beyond this concern, the inherited organic system of the alleyways is accused of challenging urban safety, fire risk for instance. These are the two main official arguments to justify the necessity of a vast alleyway enlargement programme in both cities. But it is easy to decipher other unofficial – but at least as powerful – reasons for challenging the low-rise urban pattern of alleyway neighbourhoods; think for example of the hygienist's vision of a modern city.

The metropolisation process comes hand-in-hand with a tremendous increase in demand for land and land prices during the last decade. Within urban contexts, where the price of land is, among other variables, linked to the accessibility of the street, enlarging an alleyway both maximises the value of the plot and allows residents to build higher. Thus, increasing the land's profitability is undeniably one of the most powerful engines of urban renewal of the vernacular neighbourhoods.

And so is the urban authorities' will to control and regulate the daily practices of the urban population. The figure of the street seller is among the most threatened. Despite his central place in the everyday nature of the urban fabric, his presence is more and more perceived as contrary to the 'worlding' ambitions of Hanoi and HCMC. At the interface of network and territory, both fixed and on the move, the street seller is an interesting pivot of the street socio-spatial apparatus in Vietnam. Yet the street seller tends to be evicted in favour of traffic. In this context, there is a growing convergence of views between the urban authorities and the urban middle class owners. This convergence can be explained by the growing worry of middleclass members to protect and mark out the boundaries of their newly acquired properties by promoting a clearer distinction between public and private urban spaces. The urban authorities officially support this growing distinction, by promoting the intended edification of what is called a 'civilised and modern' city *(đô thị văn minh, hiện đại)*. Official poster campaigns urge urban dwellers to follow new urban rules of civilisation, such as no trade on the sidewalk, in order to build 'cultural neighbourhoods' *(khu phố văn hóa)*.

Furthermore, the current evolution of each neighbourhood depends greatly on its relationship with the emerging and renewed 'metropolitan centralities'. In HCMC, wards 22 of *Bình Thạnh* district and 13 of *Phú Nhuận* district are among the most integrated in the official renewal projects. Interestingly, despite their advanced level of metropolisation, these two wards show different trends as far as alleyways are concerned. Most alleyways of ward 13 in *Phú Nhuận* have been enlarged and renewed over the past five years, whilst those in ward 22 in *Bình Thạnh* district will soon be replaced by new vertical urban forms, along rescaled transport infrastructures. These infrastructures are already abruptly cutting up the ancient urban fabric, reflecting perfectly a common effect of 'project-based urbanism'.

The alleyway, a matter of function

Hanoi and HCMC street patterns are characterised by an endless network of alleyways. These alleyway neighbourhoods have already shown a great capacity for transformation over the past decades, especially through the various creative interventions by residents, who make full use of the alleyways on an everyday basis. Alleyways remain core elements of the urban identity and are still the most common form of public space, even though current infrastructure developments are leading to new, very distinct, articulations between public and private spaces, which were once very blurred categories in the Vietnamese urban context.

The organic growth of the urban and social network appears to be challenged today. Despite its modest local ambitions, the current project of alleyway enlargement operates within a broader development of infrastructure by the metropolitan authorities. In the current metropolisation process, movement is privileged above the production of local territories. In this perspective, the street is envisioned as a single-function urban object, entirely dedicated to transit traffic, while it used to be highly multifunctional.

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Filling the urban transport infrastructure gap

As a consequence of their economic take-off and rapid urbanisation, the two major Vietnamese metropolises, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), saw a tremendous increase of private vehicles (motorcycles and then cars) in their streets, leading today to severe traffic congestion. To address this critical issue, the cities have two responses. On the one hand, they build new roads to satisfy the emerging middleclass that can afford private vehicles. On the other hand, they attempt to modernise public transit networks, especially by developing large scale mass rapid transit systems. While the latter is considered an appropriate response to solve urban problems (e.g., traffic congestion, atmospheric pollution, and urban sprawl), the local authorities are facing various constraints that could jeopardise the construction of the expected public transit facilities. Hence the transportation sector provides another perspective to the challenges of the metropolisation process in both Hanoi and HCMC.

Clément Musil & Vương Khánh Toàn

IT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME since electric tramways were carrying people in Hanoi and HCMC's streets. This urban snapshot actually belongs to two different past periods. The Northern metropolis operated its tramway network until the early 1990s. Decades after the American bombing campaigns that heavily damaged Hanoi's transport infrastructures, the tramway was finally dismantled because of a lack of financial resources to maintain it. In the Southern metropolis, that back then was called Saigon and was the capital of the Republic of South Vietnam, the tramway only ran until the mid-1950s. The then president of South Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm, decided in the name of modernity to remove the trams to make room for imported cars as well as scooters and motorbikes.[1] Despite different trajectories regarding urban transportation, both cities do not yet have other collective transit services (apart from bus lines); while today private vehicles increasingly clog the cities arterials.

The ongoing urban transport transition

Due to a rapid economic development that has driven the country since the mid-1980s, and its positive consequences for the population, city dwellers started to have the financial resources to drop bicycles and abandon inefficient public bus services in exchange for individual motorbikes. Because this transport mode proved to be very compatible with the network of narrow alleyways in the two cities, Hanoi and HCMC quickly became two so-called 'motorcycle dependent cities', in the same way as other South-East Asian metropolises.[2] As a result, in 2015, the capital city had nearly 5 million registered motorbikes for an estimated population of 7 million; while the Southern metropolis counted more than 8 million inhabitants with 6.5 million registered motorbikes.[3]

Although the motorbike modal share is on average 80% (and less than 10% for public transit) in both cities, the dependency is evident today with inhabitants merging with their motorbikes like Centaurs with their horses, on a never-ending commute through the city. Whereas motorbikes dominate the streets, cars emerge and appear as a strong competitor in terms of desirability, status and scarce road space. Even though the number of cars can still be considered low,[4] it is rising by more than 10% every year in both cities.

The increase of vehicles has at least two most undesirable, yet well known, consequences: congestion and pollution. Congestion leads to an annual shortfall of USD 1.2 billion for the economic stakeholders in HCMC.[5] In an effort to tackle congestion-related problems, to improve the environmental quality for city residents, and to cope with climate change-related adverse effects, the Government plans to fill the urban transport infrastructure gap by carrying out two sets of measures in each city. The strategy aims at expanding the existing road network (widening major axes, building ring roads, elevated highways and flyovers) on the one hand, and building extensive mass transit systems composed of metro lines and bus rapid transit corridors on the other. Urban transport is thus transitioning from being purely individual, to a transport system that provides public transit as an alternative.

The expected urban transport transition

Stimulated by vibrant economic growth (more than 8% on average this last decade) and by a rapid increase in population (between 3-3.5% since 2009), Hanoi and HCMC recently adopted ambitious public transit development plans. The 'Capital City Master Plan to 2030 and Vision to 2050', approved in 2011, foresees building eight metro lines (a total of 331 km), three monorail lines, plus nine express bus routes. In the south, HCMC adjusted its transport plan in 2013, which suggested that by 2030, the city would be equipped with eight metro lines, plus one tramway and two monorail lines, for a total of 216 km (see map 1) and will count six bus rapid transit corridors that bring an additional 100 km of public transit. The objective set out for both cities is a modal share of public transport reaching 25% of city travel by 2020.

However, between what the plans target and what is being realised today, there is a significant gap. Hanoi has two metro lines under construction (No.3 and 2A, of 12.5 km and 13 km respectively), a 15 km bus rapid transit corridor, and two other metro lines (No.1 and 2) in the detailed design phase. HCMC is building its first metro line (No.1) of 20 km, and line No.2 plus a section of line No.5, with the first bus rapid transit corridor barely in the detailed design phase. According to the Ministry of Transport, the first mass rapid transit that will run in Vietnam should be metro line No.2A in Hanoi; for which the opening ceremony is expected by the end of 2016 – though all projects commonly suffer critical delays and significant cost overruns.[6]

Even if construction of these public transit systems is slow, the process has been triggered. Consequently, the urban landscape in both cities will soon radically change. The new infrastructures will be built mainly with viaduct sections, and underground sections applied in high density areas only. Regarding their spatial orientation, these facilities will connect the inner city cores to their suburbs, where the local governments plan to develop satellite cities and new urban areas. These facilities will also bring ambitious and large-scale estate developments such as high-rise offices, housing, and shopping malls.

These urban development and renewal patterns are not unfamiliar in South-East Asia. In the era of globalisation, the construction of these new transportation systems confirms that the urbanisation process in Vietnam joins the 'single urban discourse'.[7] This trend is also reinforced by the involvement of powerful private domestic real estate developers (e.g., Vingroup, Bitexco, Dai Quang Minh) who are investing in areas surrounding future metro stations and who manage to bypass the rigid public planning process.[8] Both the transportation network and property development are features of 'urban convergence' observed since the late 1990s in the South-East Asian region. Today Vietnam is definitively part of this tendency with new mega-infrastructure projects underway. However, these projects are functioning under several constraints that could jeopardise the development of the expected mass public transit systems.

Constraints to the development of cities' public transit systems

Apart from technical issues that delay the construction of the metro lines and bus rapid transit corridors, the final realisation of the overall transport plans are challenged by various additional obstacles in both cities, namely financial issues and land acquisition difficulties.

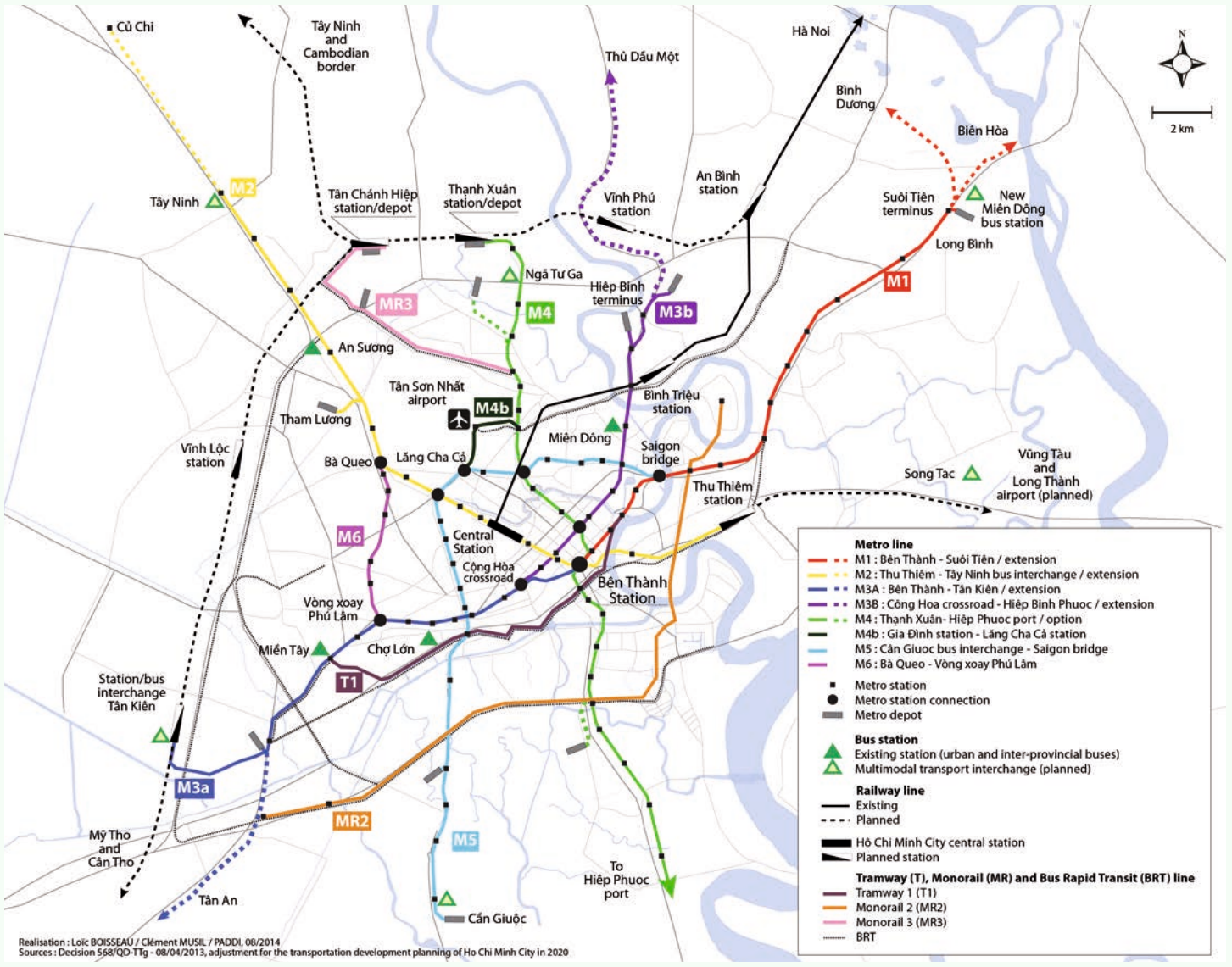
Although the Vietnamese Government aims to develop modern public transit systems, the authorities face a severe lack of financial and technical resources. The authorities mainly lean on Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided by international donors, and secondarily on private sector capital. However, because public transit projects are today both costly and sophisticated,[9] and it is uncertain whether they will generate any profit (all over the world public transit systems are mainly in deficit and subsidised), ODA mostly co-funds these initiatives. The Government contributes up to 20% of the construction costs of each project.

Today the situation seems to be troublesome and fragmented. Among all the projects that are under construction and in the detailed design stage (i.e., 9 in total), there are 9 different international donors involved. The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) co-funds metro lines No.1 and 2 in Hanoi and No.1 in Ho Chi Minh City; the Chinese Government finances one line in Hanoi (No.2A); the French Government and its cooperation agency *(Agence Française de Développement)* teamed up with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Investment Bank (EIB) to co-fund metro line No.3

Below left: Hanoi daily traffic jams (photograph by author).

Below right: Ho Chi Minh City metro line No.1 under construction (photograph by Clément Musil.

The challenge of building mass rapid transit systems



Map: Development of Ho Chi Minh City public transit system for 2020-2030 (Courtesy of PADDI).

in Hanoi; the German and Spanish Governments also joined the ADB and the EIB to co-fund two metro lines in Ho Chi Minh City (No.2 and 5); and the World Bank grants loans to build the first bus rapid transit corridors in both cities. Despite this multitude of donors, the financing of numerous additional planned projects still requires confirmation, and although other donors, such as South Korean bilateral cooperation, as well as private investors have expressed certain interest, little discussion has been concluded and uncertainty remains.

While the Government is in need of financial assistance, ODA donors are in a comfortable situation to offer, and also to compete against one another. This is explained by the benefits that each ODA supplier can gain in granting loans to Vietnam. In fact, each donor imposes particular conditions for granting their loan. The Japanese assistance, which has the most attractive financial offer, is mainly characterised by a 'tied' financial aid. This means that the loan is conditioned by the use of Japanese technology and expertise. On the other hand, for facilities in which multilateral donors are involved, the financial aid is considered to be 'untied'. The development banks allow open tenders for which both foreign and local contractors can submit their bids. However, these donors impose other strict requirements such as respect for ethical, social and environmental rules when implementing the project. The Vietnamese Government has then to meet conditions like minimising the project's adverse effects on the environment and population, particularly when resettlement is required.

Diversified financing sources are certainly an advantage to the cities, helping them with access to required funds for project implementation. In return, however, these loans weigh heavily on the country's debt and the authorities are made to comply with each donor's conditions.[10] They are often forced to depend on various foreign techniques and technologies, which may not be totally compatible with each other. Furthermore, diversification of financing parties has the effect of partitioning the projects. This approach could be counterproductive, as the goal is that all public transport facilities form a unified system in order to challenge private vehicles.

In addition to the financial aspect, access to land has been a major obstacle in every urban transport project initiated so far in Vietnam. Problems in accessing land increase the overall costs and delay the completion of the works. Expropriation, compensation and resettlement procedures are the most difficult stages in the project implementation. Unlike road building projects, the first studies on metro and bus rapid transit corridors seemed to have little impact on the land (as was the city authorities' understanding). Indeed, metro lines are built off-ground and appear to be less land-consuming. As for bus corridors, they are integrated in enlarged road arteries and thus do not directly need land acquisition.

However, since works started in Hanoi and HCMC, the land issue has re-emerged as a major concern. Whereas the need for land acquisition is limited, resettlement is inevitable, especially for works on train depots, access to stations, roads and other network deviations, installation of ventilation shafts and safety systems in underground sections. For instance, in the case of metro line No.2 in HCMC, more than 22 hectares of land located in urban districts are to be acquired and 400 households will be relocated and compensated, with the total cost estimated at USD 115 million. With such conditions, the local governments face two major challenges when building other public transit facilities: the establishment of land reserves and the management of resettlement procedures.

Although cities in Vietnam do not have the 'urban pre-emption right' to establish land reserves, both cities do have a Land Development Centre. This kind of public body is in charge of acquiring plots and compensating land users. However, they have had little room to operate so far since they have limited financial resources and land use planning is unclear. In this context, those Centres are in an unfavourable position to establish land reserves and to provide plots for building the expected infrastructures. Moreover, the land located around the future metro stations, where high land value increase is predicted, has already been acquired, notably by well-informed property developers.

Resettlement procedures related to public transport infrastructures pose another problem for the authorities. Whilst public transport projects are developed in the name of public interest, most of the land users who are affected by the projects are reluctant to transfer their rights to the administration.[11] Though land users do not oppose the legitimacy of the operation, they contest the amount of proposed compensation. Actually, land prices are often undervalued, while both cities periodically experience uncontrolled land price increasing.[12] Furthermore, from the first land assessment until the government's request for site clearance, which may take several years, land prices may have surged, causing fresh disagreements with disaffected households. Moreover, opposition is stronger and more violent with households who do not have regulated land use rights. The administration estimates that the latter are only compensated for their lost property but not for the land, and the compensation amount for the building is often ridiculously low compared to the amount paid for the land. Hence, the progress of urban transport projects poses a critical issue of equity of households to administrative procedures, and questions the transparency of resettlement regulations.

The future of public transit depends on pragmatic policies

Due to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City's rapid urbanisation, building modern mass transit systems is a priority to ensure sustainable and liveable urban development in the coming decades. To break with current practices of city travel mainly by motorbikes, the Government has no option but to invent a new way of mobility based on fast, efficient and attractive public transport, ensuring that commuting is viable across the entire metropolitan areas.

To cope with this challenge, the cities do have ambitious plans. But because of lacking financial resources and the sophistication of planned facilities like the metro lines, the future of the metropolitan public transit systems depends on foreign financial technology and aid. Challenges in land acquisition, tardy resettlement procedures, and land disputes have slowed down the completion of works. Furthermore, issues in governance of such on-going projects have tested the authorities. They are now pushed to design a suitable institutional architecture to ensure that facilities under construction may later function as a unique system.

Given these constraints, it is doubtful that urban public transit systems will be built faster than the road networks, in spite of the pledged construction of the first metro lines in Hanoi and HCMC. Regarding the metropolitan road network evolution in both cities, the local governments have technical know-how at their disposal without being reliant on foreign technology. They are also able to raise funds through partnerships involving the private sector based on proven and successful mechanisms. Moreover, a growing slice of the population that can afford a car will expect the development of road networks. The challenge that the authorities face does not only concern financial and technical aspects, but also its capacity to convince the citizens that public transport, instead of private vehicles, is the future of a modern metropolis.

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4 Respectively with more than half a million cars registered in each city in 2015, this amount represents half of the private cars in circulation nationwide (op.cit).
5 See Vietnam Net (09/16/2014), *"Kẹt xe gây thiệt hại 1,2 tỷ USD/năm cho TP.HCM"* ["Traffic jams cause damage 1.2 billion/year for HCMC"].
6 Regularly the local press reports news concerning the reassessment of both cost and schedule of the projects. As an example see following articles: *Tuổi Trẻ* (27/10/2015) "Chinese-contracted railway project in Hanoi suffers 57% cost overrun"; *Thanh Niên* (13/09/2014) *"Metro vốn tăng 'phi mã', tiến độ 'rùa bò'"* ["Metro: cost increases with the speed of a galloping horse, project progress at the pace of the tortoise"].
7 Without denying the local specificities, Dick and Rimmer (1998) in an article entitled "Beyond the Third World City: the new urban geography of South-East Asia", suggest that since the late 1980s, and after the colonialism period, the process of urban convergence has re-emerged. (i.e., "South-East Asian cities are on the way to become more like Western cities")
8 Based on the case of Metro Manila, a similar trend has already been analyzed by Shaktin (2008) in "The city and the bottom line: urban megaprojects and the privatization of planning in Southeast Asia".
9 Depending on the technology and the contractors, building a metro line costs between USD 70 and 165 million/km. For instance the cost of the 20km line No.1 in Ho Chi Minh City is over USD 2.5 billion.
10 Vietnam's public debt is approaching the limit of 65% of the country's gross domestic product, which is considered by the international donors as a threshold to review the grant loans' conditions.
11 It should be noted that there is no private land ownership in Vietnam. According to the 1992 Constitution, all land belongs to the People, and the State is responsible for its management. Since the land law promulgated in 1993, land users are supposed to have a land use right regulated by the administration. This right can be revoked by authorities to implement projects that are part of the city's master plan and land users have to be compensated.
12 For instance, on the land market in HCMC, one square meter on the outskirts costs around USD 500, and in central districts, the price reaches USD 4,000. But to calculate compensations, the administration refers to the official land price framework, which is irrelevant and lower than the market price. In recent years the gap between the administrated prices and real market prices has tended to decrease.

The production of the city: reshaping state-society relation

The Vietnamese Party-State, characterised by its communist affiliation, enduring centralisation and lasting authoritarianism is nevertheless evolving. The city production and reproduction mechanisms actively contribute to reshaping State-Society relations and local political structures.

Juliette Segard

URBANISATION IN VIETNAM, both in its nature and modalities, can be seen as 'colonising' peri-urban and rural areas, as local stakeholders (from the public authorities to the inhabitants) are excluded from the planning and decision-making processes. This sprawl takes place without fully considering the existing situation, by dismantling territories and progressively imposing a new political and administrative order.

Urbanisation is presented as an inevitable step for the modernisation and the industrialisation of the country. The urban forms produced reflect urban utopia mainstreamed in many official discourses: cities have to be modern *[hiện đại]* and have to symbolise the power of the Nation. Unplanned and endogenous urbanisation doesn't fit these categories whereas international 'products', from shopping malls to condominiums, are desirable emblems of Vietnam's worldwide integration.

More pragmatically, the dynamics and ways of extension allow both personal and structural accumulation of wealth for the established powers as well as for the *nouveaux riches.* Considering the 'land fever' and on-going speculation, public-private growth coalitions are progressively shaped, between public authorities and private (domestic or foreign) entrepreneurs.

The scale and pace of projects have increased tremendously in certain regions, as in the Red River Delta,[1] bringing urbanisation to an all new level, especially since infrastructures have been developed and migration rules loosened, allowing people to move more easily. For instance, both urban-dwellers and rural migrants resettle in peri-urban areas, the latter to fill unqualified and low-paid positions in industrial zones or to work in the construction sector. Urban fringes are thus profoundly transformed by these material, demographical and social evolutions, which hybridise territories and communities.

But the situation is not that one dimensional, and the city production or reproduction mechanisms actually contribute to reshaping State-Society relations and local political structures. Dynamics of urbanisation renew tensions, create new tensions or even cause uproars. The popular resistance is multi-shaped and has various roots: it goes from protecting cultural heritage or natural resources at the provincial-scale, to defending a few hectares of agricultural land in a village.

Resisting the exogenous nature of urbanisation

In numerous villages surrounding Hanoi, local resistance to recovery of lands for urbanisation purposes is triggered by several grievances: the protection of local livelihoods that rely either on pluriactivity or on agriculture, the defence of the community 'threatened' by the arrival of a non-native population, the feeling of injustice and the perception that projects are harming the common good, the uncertainty and privation of reliable information, the precluding decision-making processes and, prosaically, the insufficient amount of compensation.[2] Some arguments can be stronger in some villages than others, but generally speaking, all resistance encompasses these elements one way or another.

The imposition of a project or unfavourable policy contributes to ad hoc coalitions of opposition that can bring together various stakeholders: the village as a whole, only a few households, the hamlets adjacent to the future project, local authorities, mass organisations, head of hamlet, local communist party members, etc. Of course, on the decision makers' and promoters' side the goal is to prevent the formation of these collectives and to fragment the front, using threats, and moral or financial incentives to 'surrender' first.

Local authorities, torn by their dual mandate and accountability – as representatives of their constituencies and as the agents of the State – flip from one side to the other depending on leaders' personality, situation, grading of the project on the injustice scale or pressure put on them. Whereas in some villages they can be the 'intermediary' negotiating and even promoting a project, in others they can lead the opposition or advocate for adjustments. The palette of resistance 'tools' also varies from one conflict to another; similar to Scott's "everyday forms of resistance", it ranges from propagating rumours to lodging a formal complaint to the higher levels of authorities.[3] The last resort is to physically and vocally confront a project, with very strong risks of being beaten or jailed.

These actions need to be contextualised in a movement of the liberalisation of association rights, as long as they are not subversive of or challenging to the Party's interests. Far from democracy, freedom of speech and association, this nevertheless opens new ways of creating groups that fall outside the traditional mobilisation structures, i.e., mass organisations.[4] Both NGOs and leisure associations, which can be spaces of exchange, debate and awareness raising, are multiplying in size and number. Some of these groups actually advocate for change, in policies or practices, while others are much more local, yet still in favour of helping to build a community.

The Regime pragmatism: containing the crises

The Regime, while powerful and authoritarian, is also well aware of people's opinions and is careful to use the proper amount of repression on the one hand and leniency on the other, to take divergences of opinion into account or to limit their expression.[5] The production of the city and planning regulations are good examples of the iterative process, between State and Society, of designing and adapting the law and even institutions, so that the Party-State is not threatened. Adjustment to reality and pragmatism are key, and in that sense the Regime and its powers are well suited to quickly reacting and adapting.

For instance, while division and coercion manoeuvres can sometimes succeed, especially when public forces are involved, villagers' coalitions can also manage to halt a project, challenge it and, in any case, participate in a larger movement that influences law-making, rules, procedures. Bypassing traditional structures of 'representation', their arguments emerge in the public realm. Newspapers, blogs or oral transmission contribute to raising awareness on planning and land-related conflicts: people know what happened in other villages and methods of resisting are spreading through the peri-urban areas. At the same time, people are better informed of rules and rights; in some urban districts citizens have utilised the justice department and have started legal trials. Nevertheless, even if there is a clear accumulation of resistance and 'hot-spots', it would be misleading to interpret this as the creation of a common front or a wider social and political movement.[6] Conflicts are predominantly local, contingent with local affairs and rarely go beyond that.

However, in recent years in the Red River Delta, for instance, examples of shifts in public policies or implementation decisions have been numerous. Following the 2008 change of administrative and territorial boundaries of the capital, the city's authorities – under central government – decided to suspend most investment and construction licences, officially in order to check their relevance for the Master Plan. But it was also a way to benefit more directly from the extension of Hanoi, both politically and economically, and to 'freeze' and then cancel some projects that triggered popular resistance.[7] This cut-down reflected the multiplication of projects that didn't respond to any needs and which only revealed district /province entrepreneurial positioning or speculation.

Nowadays, reconversion of uses and revocation of licences for industrial parks that have been announced by the Prime Minister show the central authority's pragmatism: withdraw support to projects, sometimes locally selected, that are neither justifiable nor efficient and that may or have caused local resistance. Institutional and legal frameworks are also evolving by partly taking into account citizens' claims, nationwide. For instance, following the 1997 rural uprisings in Thái Bình, Thanh Hóa and Đồng Nai, which were linked to corruption and collusion, the Grassroots Democracy Decree was adopted, introducing new information, control and participation procedures to take local decisions. More recently, the revised Land Law was adopted and entered into force in 2014. Some articles clearly address opacity and haziness of procedures; e.g., while the payment of compensation is set to take place 30 days after the recovery of land, councils need to be implemented by the president of the People's Committee at the provincial and communal levels, in order to evaluate the local circumstances and suggest compensations accordingly.

Obviously, there is a major disconnect between the legislative framework and its implementation on the ground, and these laws or decrees are issued to a great extent in order to present a more democratic and voluntaristic face to the public opinion, but also to the international community and the private sector, even if it is not backed by strict enforcement. Nevertheless, the legislation and the administration evolve, so does the Regime, and citizens sometimes actively contribute to these dynamics.

Control over natural resources and urban planning question both structures and individuals, public authorities and citizens: how they position themselves, what to protect, which limits to impose, what matters. Production or renovation of cities challenge power and in Vietnam's case it actually contributes to 'negotiating' the Regime's authoritarianism, as a growing number of citizens rally to defend either their livelihoods and interests, or the common good.[8]

Above: Area of Nam Trung Yen, a new urban zone on the outskirts of Hanoi (Courtesy of François Carlet-Soulages/ NOI Pictures).

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Migrant workers in suburban HCMC: towards an emergent autonomous activism?

In HCMC's metropolitan area, suburban areas are home to a significant concentration of population and industrial estates. Essentially funded by foreign companies, HCMC's industrial parks are hubs for export activities and flows of internal migrant workers.[1] This concentration leads to various social and economic issues, including the temporary and incomplete integration of migrant workers into the community. Mostly coming from rural areas, Vietnamese migrant workers suffer various social and economic difficulties essentially due to a restrictive and obsolete internal residency permit system known as the *hộ khẩu* system. In response to such a precarious situation, Vietnamese migrant workers establish multiple individual and collective adaptation strategies. Furthermore, the dynamics linking the suburban areas, industrial estates and worker dormitories, create a new dominated social class eager to claim social rights and seek recognition from the authorities.

Trần Khắc Minh

From economic insecurity and social stigmatisation to adaptation strategies

Migrant workers' integration into the city is complicated for several reasons, both material and immaterial. Firstly, the majority of migrant workers live in poorly equipped dormitories, sharing small rooms of 15-18 square metres.[2] Migrant workers' consumption patterns and lifestyles are also characterised by the rationalisation of essential expenses, leaving aside leisure expenses. Their working lives are monotonous and exhausting, yet they are poorly paid, with monthly wages ranging from 100 to 200 euros per month.

Alongside the economic insecurity, migrant workers in HCMC also suffer from social stigmas, reflected clearly in a restrictive residential registration system and a widely held anti-migrant mentality in the Vietnamese urban society. The majority of migrant workers in HCMC only own short-term residency permits (KT3 or KT4), which have many administrative constraints: owners of these residency permits are unable to access the housing market, to send their children to public schools or to benefit from the local healthcare system. Furthermore, the administrative process to obtain permanent residency permits for migrant workers is particularly slow or even deliberately delayed by local authorities.[3] The anti-migrant mentality pervasive in the Vietnamese society leads to inferiorisation of the migrants.[4] Finally, the relationship between migrant workers and the local suburban population could be described as an identity conflict between a young and dynamic urban world, inspired by modernity, and a declining ancient rural world.[5] Industrial zones in Vietnamese metropolises are a perfect theatre for these oppositions to flourish, and in doing so, they contribute to the production of 'unequal cities' in Vietnam.

Spatially segregated and socially stigmatised, migrant workers in HCMC suburban areas develop a large range of adaptation strategies to facilitate their integration into the city. Community support networks, tightly linked to worker dormitories, represent the most primitive form of these adaptation strategies. They are strictly based on regional affiliations of migrant workers. They are also characterised by their omnipresence and versatility: community networks are able to disseminate information and to provide daily and financial support to migrants. Despite their unquestionable importance, these networks have many structural weaknesses. As they rely mainly on workers' dormitories and regional affiliations, they create a new communitarianism that aggravates the segregation between local population and migrant workers, and also between different migrant communities.

Emergence of a new, autonomous, decentralised and spontaneous worker activism

The collective dimension of migrant workers' adaptation strategies relies less on community support networks than on the development of an autonomous, spontaneous and decentralised worker activism. The *đổi mới* reforms marked the beginning of an important liberal turn of the State on labour questions with a withdrawal from the negotiations between workers and employers. Consequently, tensions between workers and companies have progressively increased, leading to intense worker mobilisations from 2006 to 2008. Since then, a strong worker activism has emerged.

Struggle and opposition methods are sophisticated. Based on local migrant communities, workers' mobilisations are spontaneous and decentralised; waves of actions are organised from one industrial zone to another. The leaders of these movements are usually kept anonymous,[6] as their organisational roles are essential for these mobilisations.

A typical worker dormitory in a suburban area of HCMC (district Bình Tân) (Photo by Marie Gibert).

Ways of resisting are particularly diverse, combining soft methods such as collective petitions, and hard methods such as collective resignations or abandonment of work to paralyse the production line. The degree of intensity of these strategies depends on the employer's reaction; without meaningful results from soft methods, hard strategies will be initiated to force employers to engage in negotiations.

State withdrawal from labour issues and the crisis of the Vietnamese trade union

Before the *đổi mới* reforms, labour issues were entirely in the hands of the State. To protect workers' interests, the Vietnamese government established its own executive organism – the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) had also created a unique national trade union, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), to take charge of labour issues.

After the *đổi mới* reforms commenced, the role of the State in labour protection issues became more and more obsolete. Today, the VGCL and the MOLISA are particularly weak in protecting workers. The slow legal procedures when organising a strike and the inefficiency of VGCL's local cells cannot provide a strong framework for workers' mobilisations. Essentially remaining under the control of the CPV, the VGCL appears to be a simple propaganda tool.

The diminishing role of the State in labour protection issues has led to the emergence of worker activism. The development of a new worker activism is essentially based on the emergence of a new political actor, 'the informal workers' leaders', who coordinate the movement at a local level. The relation between this new political actor and the State is particularly conflictual. For example, the VGCL and the MOLISA exclude all informal workers' leaders from labour issues negotiations. According to the State, the informal workers' leaders are considered to be reactionary and politically incompatible with the communist party.

Confronted with the erosion of its legitimacy, the State has recently undertaken a set of policies aiming to improve workers' living conditions and to reform the VGCL. In 2005, a new household registration procedure was created with a simplification of the criteria for obtaining permanent residency permits.[7] In 2007, a new residence law was enacted that allowed 230,000 migrants in HCMC to obtain their permanent residency permit.[8] As a consequence, the household registration system is becoming less and less of an administrative constraint for migrants trying to settle in the cities. The State has also established policies to improve migrant workers' living conditions through new bank loan systems, to encourage the construction of affordable low-income housing and micro-credit systems, with the help from NGOs and international institutions.

To better protect migrant workers, multiple stakeholders are involved: media, provincial authorities, informal workers' leaders, the State, etc. Henceforth, provincial authorities manage worker issues by conducting negotiations between companies and workers. In 2007, a revision of the Labour Law defined a solid framework for workers' mobilisations. Consequently, the VCGL has been attached to provincial authorities, while its local cells have been involved in companies' management. In HCMC, different initiatives have been conducted to integrate informal leaders into the protection of workers: the number of labour inspectors has increased from 7 to 100 since 2006, and self-managed worker groups have also been organised.[9] Nevertheless, under the supervision of the VCP, the VCGL is categorically opposed to this change, as it considers informal workers' leaders to be reactionary agents. In 2014, the anti-China worker riots in Binh Duong province threatened the involvement of the State. The government decided to oppress worker activism, condemning anti-China riots as a reactionary movement. In conclusion, the relationship between the State and worker activism is extremely ambiguous and fragile. By tackling political issues, contemporary activism appears to be directly opposing the VCP hegemony.

Despite the State's attempts to pacify the situation, the recent policies present several weaknesses. Firstly, the majority of migrant workers are still excluded from permanent residency because companies commonly refuse to sign long-term contracts, which is one of the most important criteria to obtain permanent residency permits.[10] Secondly, microcredit and social housing are scarce and hardly accessible to migrant workers. Finally, migrant workers do not show a strong will to integrate. Migrant workers' careers are unstable, temporary and unsustainable, which does not encourage hope for permanent settlement in HCMC. The intention to return to their native provinces is rooted in many migrant workers' mentality.

In conclusion, the integration of migrant workers to HCMC is essentially characterised by a fundamental economic and social insecurity, despite various individual and collective adaptation strategies. Migrants remain second-class city-dwellers who cannot afford, and are not given the opportunity, to integrate – spatially, economically or socially. On top of this exclusion, their citizen's rights are denied as they cannot participate in the local agora, councils and branches of mass organisations included, while their representation in the work sphere is limited. In order to challenge this situation, workers have started to organise, progressively constituting a new 'class' of workers, but also of inhabitants. The State clearly needs to encourage migrant integration and to tackle the issues of worker protection. A radical reform of the VGCL would be essential to better embed the contemporary informal worker activism that is arising. A balanced power relationship between workers, companies and authorities is a prerequisite for the integration of migrants in the suburbs of HCMC, and society at large.

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Tourism, urbanisation and globalisation in Vietnam

Vietnamese cities are key in the regional positioning of their country's tourism sector. The authorities have encouraged this role, aiming for a stronger urban hierarchy. From the local to the international level, tourism participates in the material and symbolic production of Vietnamese cities. It is a significant factor in urban growth and architectural changes, but tourism also fosters global integration.

Emmanuelle Peyvel & Võ Sáng Xuân Lan

IN 2014, THERE WAS A RECORD NUMBER of 38.5 million dom-estic tourists and 7.87 million international visitors in Vietnam, generating 7.3 billion euros.[1] According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), that amount represented 9.3% of the GDP and 7.7% of total employment in that same year (including jobs indirectly supported by the industry).[2] This mobility is fast growing: in 20 years, domestic tourism has multiplied by a factor of 11 and international tourism by 8. While the growth of international tourism in Vietnam is impressive, we should keep in mind that it only represents a third of the visitors to Thailand and a seventh of those in China. Nevertheless, this country is an ever-more popular destination in Pacific Asia, which remains one of the most dynamic touristic regions in the world: this region received less than one hundredth of the international tourism flow in 1950, it now receives almost a fifth. By 2030, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) forecasts an average annual growth rate of 3.3% worldwide, 4.9% in Asia-Pacific. Therefore, Asia is today a center of gravity in the global tourism system, in which Vietnam fully belongs. Tourist nationalities reflect both regional and international links with the past: the Chinese, Korean and Japanese respectively occupy the top three places, the USA comes in 4th, Russia 6th and France 11th.

The growth of tourism is a consequence of the urban transformations in the country since *Đổi Mới.* Indeed, tourism and cities entertain a privileged relationship: cities are both gateways for international tourism and transit points structuring the tourist map of the country, but they are also destinations in their own right. For all these reasons, tourism is an essential actor in Vietnamese urbanisation, both materially and symbolically. It is a factor of urban growth and architectural transformations, but also fosters global integration with its associated flows of people, capital, practices and imaginary.

Tourism also contributes to urban lifestyles. It shows us the types of city-dwellers that the Vietnamese are becoming, the expression of their individuality, their aspirations and the meaning they assign to wealth. Tourism is a good way to understand how the Vietnamese society builds its relationship with time, both past and future. The Vietnamese city is increasingly valued for its emblematic places of both modernity – embodied by buildings and shopping malls – and historical depth – with active heritage policies, and now 8 properties inscribed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage that contribute to an international recognition of the country.

Above: Tourism as a vector of globalisation: a Hmong woman in front of a pub at the Sapa Hill Station in 2007 (photo by Emmanuelle Peyvel)

We will study these transformations from a geographical perspective to better understand how tourism is actively involved in contemporary spatial changes in Vietnamese cities. This work was conducted by delving into French colonial archives, planning documents and official statistical sources, with participative observations made during long term field-work in Vietnam. At the national scale, we demonstrate that tourism is a factor of urban growth and ex nihilo constructions. At the regional scale, we highlight the role of cities in the structuring of major tourist regions. At the local scale, we analyse the role of tourism in the globalisation of Vietnamese cities.

Tourism as an urban and colonial creation

The history of tourism in Vietnam reveals the complexities of globalisation. Recreational mobilities, such as hydrotherapy and pilgrimage, are not new: travelers' tales echo Chinese aesthetics of landscape and body. However, the modern understanding of tourism appeared with French colonisation and the construction of the first infrastructures dedicated to tourism:[3] 7 seaside resorts (*Hòn Gay, Đồ Sơn, Sầm Sơn, Cửa Lò, Cửa Tùng, Nha Trang* and Cap St Jacques, renamed *Vũng Tàu*), and 5 hill stations (*Đà Lạt, Bà Nà, Tam Đảo, Mau Son* and *Sa Pa*). Those places were chosen for aesthetic and landscape considerations. However, the proximity to big cities, where settlers were concentrated, is essential in understanding the location of those stations and resorts. Indeed, those places were created for the rest and recreation of city dwellers.[4] In the North, Hanoi commanded three hill stations (*Sa Pa, Tam Đảo* and the small station of *Mẫu Sơn*) and four seaside resorts, that were directly dependent on medium-sized towns: *Cửa Lò* in connection with *Vinh, Đồ Sơn* and *Hòn Gay* with *Hải Phòng* and *Sầm Sơn* with *Thanh Hóa*. In the South, Sài Gòn's dwellers could enjoy the seaside resort of Cap Saint Jacques and the hill stations of *Đà Lạt*. They also gradually invested in seaside resorts such as *Phan Thiết* and *Nha Trang*. In the Centre, the settlers of Tourane (today *Đà Nẵng*), and to a lesser extent of *Huế* and *Faïfo* (*Hội An* today), could visit the hill station of *Bà Nà* and the seaside resort of *Cửa Tùng*.

In the colonial context, these stations were outstanding, not only for the physical landscape, but also in the way they were conceived. Recreational landscape transgressed both the spiritual function traditionally given to the mountains by the Kinh people, and the livelihood function assigned to the sea by the fishing culture. Both the mountain and the sea were feared. That explains the extent to which hotels, sport fields, hiking trails, panoramas and belvederes that were built in the mountains, or seafronts and beaches developed along the shoreline, constituted profound spatial innovations. At that time, the practices and representations associated with these infrastructures were totally new to the Kinh people. Tourism was therefore not only a populating activity, it also participated in the circulation of urban practices into rural places such as *Đà Lạt,* on the mountainous plateau of Lang Bian, where phones, running water, electricity and even cinemas suddenly made their appearance with the first tourists.[5]

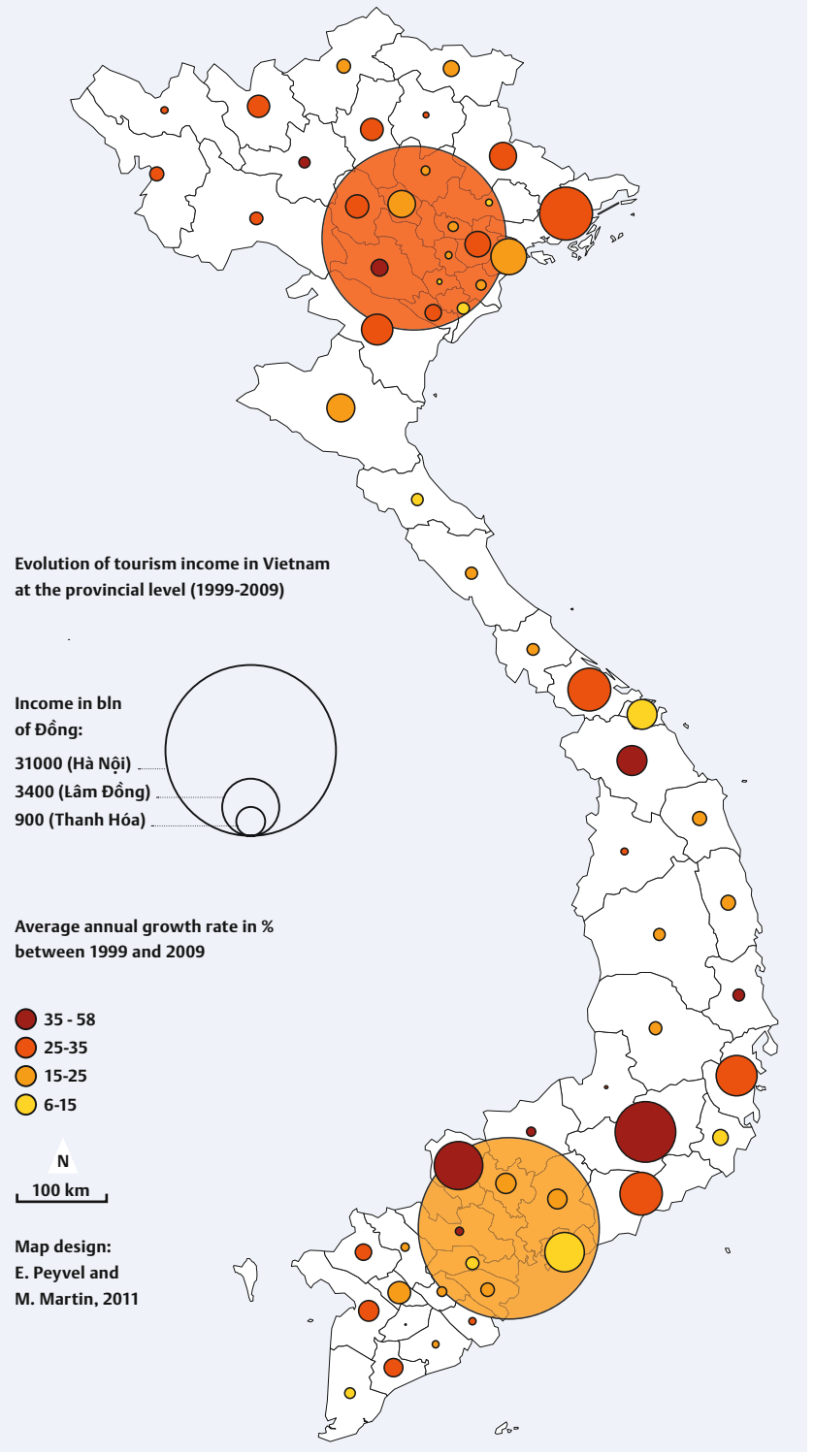
Tourism-driven urbanism has been sustained despite decolonisation, war and the *Bao Cấp* period; none of the recreational destinations have disappeared. Today, all of them still live off tourism, and three have even experienced demographic growth and economic diversification, giving them a complete city status. Vũng Tàu and Nha Trang now exceed 400,000 inhabitants; their economy is being diversified with oil and fishing, and even academics in Nha Trang. *Đà Lạt* has over 214,000 inhabitants living mainly from tourism, horticulture and academics today. Tourist conurbations have been built, particularly between *Phan Thiết* and *Mũi Né*, and between *Đà Nẵng* and *Hội An*. Mainly fuelled by big resorts, this phenomenon has led to the privatisation of the coastline, which can lead to conflicts with the local people who see their access to the sea increasingly restricted.

Urban hierarchy and the regional structuration of tourism

Today, cities are key in the structuring of tourism in the country. This function was encouraged by the Vietnamese authorities in their first development plan, for the period 1995-2000. This plan initially identified four tourism regions: North, Central, South Central and South of the country, each structured by a regional capital and a well identified urban network. The Northern region, stretching from *Hà Giang* to *Hà Tĩnh*, was arranged around Hanoi and secondarily by *Hạ Long* Bay, and by the seaside resorts *Sầm Sơn* and *Đồ Sơn*. Hanoi also gives shape to tourism by means of tours to 'ethnic minorities' in the Northern mountains, mainly through the town of Lào Cai. The Central region, stretching from *Quảng Bình* to *Quảng Ngãi,* was arranged around *Huế* and *Đà Nẵng*, and differentiates itself through visits to historical sites related to the former imperial capital *Huế*, to war heritage (with the DMZ) and to the Cham civilisation (with *Mỹ Sơn*). *Hội An* has continued to gain traction in this region, particularly since its UNESCO classification in 1999. More recently, the third and fourth regions were merged. Initially formed by the South of the Centre and the South, this entity now extends from *Kon Tum* to *Minh Hải,* and has been arranged primarily around HCMC, but secondarily also *Nha Trang* and *Đà Lạt*.

Even today, land use and development plans still confirm the central role of Hanoi in the North, the urban trio of *Huế, Đà Nẵng* and *Hội An* in the Centre, and HCMC in the South. Acting as the capitals of their regions, they can be a driving force for their territory. The inner suburbs of Hanoi benefit from increasing tourism, especially in some craft villages and remarkable pagodas.[6] This phenomenon is also striking in the Mekong Delta, where ecotourism is now well developed in *Bến Tre, Cần Thơ, Sa Đéc, Vĩnh Long* and *Mỹ Tho*. Tourism is in constant progression in the region of *Long Xuyên* and *Châu Đốc* with the normalisation of the Cambodian border.
The State officially recognises a number of national tourism regions (*Khu du lịch quốc gia;* KDLQG); these are regions whose infrastructures have welcomed at least 1 million tourists per year, in an area larger than 1000 hectares. Today, there are 21 KDLQG (an estimated 39 by 2030), mostly located near big and medium-sized cities, because they have a recreational function for city-dwellers. The State recognition of these areas confirms the urban predominance.

Tourism contributes to the strengthening of the Vietnamese urban hierarchy: its flows, infrastructures and revenues are more concentrated in the East than in the West of the country, that is to say the most urbanised part of the country. While the provinces of Hanoi, *Quảng Ninh* and *Hải Phòng* alone account for over 15% of the country's hotel rooms, those of *Bà Rịa, Vũng Tàu* and HCMC have over 18%. However, the Centre region is more fragmented, resulting from the dual influences of both Hanoi and HCMC. Hanoi and HCMC together account for over 80% of the five-star hotels in the country. It is also in these two metropolitan centers that the leading structures of tourism are concentrated: between 2000 and 2009, Hanoi and HCMC together accounted for 67% of the country's total tourism turnover (see the map).



Tourism, a means of globalisation for Vietnamese cities
For Vietnamese cities, tourism is also a powerful means of integration into the global economy, since they are the main target of foreign direct investment. Global companies are established in the country, such as Accor, the world leader in hotel management, which has been authorised in the country since 1991. Less than 25 years later, it manages 16 hotels, representing more than 4000 rooms. However, this global capitalism follows a specific Vietnamese format, due to socialism.[7] The State remains a strategic player in the tourism sphere. Rather than pulling out of business abruptly for the sole benefit of the private sector, it has restructured its practices. It still oversees the development of tourism through laws, development plans and investments, especially in transport and training. The current investment plan, running until 2030 and amounting to 94.2 billion dollars, aims to deliver infrastructure upgrades, train the personnel according to international standards, and to align tourism with the discourse of sustainable development. Public actors are therefore essential, from the central to the local. *Saigontourist*, a company built in 1975 and revamped in 1999 under the control of the popular committee of the city, is a good example of the new modes of action of the State. With a total capital of over 152 million dollars, it acts as the owner, manager or investor in catering, accommodation, transport, sport and culture. In 2015, *Saigontourist* owned 54 hotels (including some luxury hotels of HCMC), 8 travel service companies, 13 resorts and 28 restaurants, making it the biggest tourism company in Vietnam.

The different transport modes used by tourists also confirms the urban predominance: cities are both hubs for national tourism and destination themselves. According to the results of the tourist expenditure survey (2013), if cars and minibuses are the most popular mode of transport, fostering a real spread of tourism across the country, airplanes are specific to large cities, with the exception of areas that have benefited from a strong-willed transport policy, such as *Điện Biên Phủ, Đà Lạt et Ban Mê Thuột.* In this perspective, it is interesting to note that tourism could legitimise the opening up of certain areas, such as the island of *Phú Quốc* and the *Côn Đảo* archipelago in the South of the country. As international and national hubs, big Vietnamese cities present the most varied modes of transport for tourists. While the train is slowly declining due to its slow speed and comparative cost, it is still present wherever airport connections are not yet effective (as in the axis Hanoi/Lào Cai). It also constitutes a popular mode of transport to domestic seaside resorts, as in the province of *Nghệ An*. Vietnamese cities act as tourist hubs, with one notable exception: they are not cruise cities, despite Vietnam being a coastal country. As a means of transport, the boat is still ignored, and the cruising market is almost inexistent, despite significant potential. The authorities are keen to develop the sector, especially in HCMC; by 2030, it aims to become a Southeast Asia tourist center by hosting cruise ships.

Producing the Vietnamese cities through and by tourism
At the local scale, tourism affects the architectural changes of Vietnamese cities. The seaside resorts built for this sole activity are organised according to the waterfront. Since the sea has become a landscape, resorts stretch along the coastline. Now, this landscape determines the land value: the further away from the seaside, the less the land costs, and the less the city is dense. Socialism has profoundly changed urbanisation in these seaside resorts and the access to land. The Northern seaside resort of Cửa Lò, that depends mostly on domestic tourism, is a good example of this land functioning: the largest and most central locations are owned by the State, which built accommodations parallel to the sea. As a consequence, the most recent private accommodations are forced either to fit into the existing urban discontinuities, within the tubular forms perpendicular to the sea, or they are relegated to the edges of the resorts, where the land necessary for the most ambitious projects, such as golf courses, is located. In the bigger seaside resorts, like *Vũng Tàu, Nha Trang* and *Hạ Long* City, where international tourism increases the land pressure, the State can sell its well-located properties at high prices.

In the cities that tourism has not created, but where it was introduced, architectural and functional transformations also take place. Neighborhoods can revolve around tourism, especially in HCMC, with the backpacker area of *Phạm Ngũ Lão,* in Hanoi (36 Streets area) or in Nha Trang (between *Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai* and *Tuệ Tĩnh* streets, along the seafront promenade *Trần Phú*). The architecture and the functioning of these neighborhoods result from a hybridisation typical of globalisation, between local characteristics and globalised consumption patterns of leisure. Indeed, it is quite common in Vietnam for a district to specialise in an economic activity. In such areas, tourism is inserted into the existing grid of roads, made up of major arteries connected to a dense network of alleyways that are well-suited to tubular houses, and adapted to the land pressure, which tourism also favors.

The urban landscape is also specific because of billboards, neon signs, advertisement – often in foreign languages, mainly English, but also Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian and French. They create a cosmopolitan atmosphere, especially recognisable at night. Dedicated to pleasure, these neighborhoods have an exceptional concentration of bars, restaurants, travel agencies, nightclubs, spas and nail salons. Recognised as particularly cosmopolitan and permissive, they can be frequented by young and wealthy Vietnamese mingling with travelers. They participate in the development of an urban rest and recreation culture (having a drink with friends, dancing, partying, etc.) that modifies the bodily and behavioral norms, visible in the outfits, alcohol and drugs consumption, and the presence of prostitutes, although formally condemned as social vices by the socialist regime. The entwinement of tourist and leisure practices also characterises the gamification of city centers, where festivals and exhibitions are more and more numerous. Closely associated with the event policy of major cities, tourism has become a matter of economic development and cultural influence for the authorities, as the example of the *Huế* festival shows us. As a result, many facilities have been redeveloped, especially on the waterfront (like in *Vũng Tàu* or in in HCMC, with the *Nhiêu Lộc* canal) and major urban parks, like the Lenin Park in Hanoi or the *Bình Quới* Park in in HCMC.

Staging Vietnamese cities: tourism and the construction of national identity, modernity and authenticity
Finally, tourism contributes to the symbolic staging of the city. This function is primarily political, imposed by the socialist regime: regional and national capitals are privileged places for national building. It is there that one finds most of the museums, in particular those that specialise in history, war and national heroes. The most frequented museums are the *Hồ Chí Minh* Mausoleum and the museum of ethnology in Hanoi, and the War Remnants Museum and the Reunification palace in HCMC, two hot spots for both domestic and international tourism.

Vietnamese cities also have a symbolic role in the country's relation to time: today they embody both modernity and heritage. They provide a spectacle of modernity that by itself justifies a visit, as evidenced by the growing phenomenon of sightseeing from tower-tops (like the Bitexco Tower in HCMC, or the Lotte Center Skyscraper in Hanoi), but also by the increasing popularity of bars, restaurants and hotels with rooftop terraces. Shopping malls, as a quintessential urban activity, also constitute a destination for tourists. HCMC and Hanoi in particular guarantee access to certain products, especially imported or luxurious ones that can't be found elsewhere. Since 1997 and the opening of the Saigon Center (District 1), HCMC has added no less than a dozen major malls, all of them located in the city center (like Vincom Center in the Dong Khoi emblematic street, or Diamond Plaza, strategically located behind the cathedral) or in new centralities such as Saigon South. Visiting new buildings and shopping is an experience of urban modernity both for tourists and city dwellers who participate in the globalised circulation of leisure models and consumption patterns.[8]

At the same time, some cities in the country build on consensual Vietnamese tradition and identity. Vietnamese heritages are the subject of specific protection and care. Among the 8 properties inscribed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Vietnam, 4 are in cities: the *Huế* Monuments since 1993, *Hội An* ancient town since 1999, the imperial citadel of Hanoi since 2010 and the citadel of *Hồ* dynasty since 2011. Interestingly, HCMC is still struggling to play a significant role in the development of heritage in of the country.

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Drafting and implementing urban heritage preservation policies

After decades of war and destruction, followed by the reunification of the country in 1976, the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam gave right of way to social and economic reconstruction and development. Architectural and urban heritage preservation did not appear as a priority *de facto*. However, in 1984 a first decree related to the preservation of historical and cultural relics was issued. This first step was followed during the 1990s by a broad inventory, led by the Ministry of Culture, to identify Vietnam's heritage throughout the country. Eventually, the first law regarding cultural heritage was adopted in 2001 to protect monuments, notably in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Through these key stages, the increasing interest for architectural and urban heritage matched the new urban dynamics that took place, namely the metropolisation process and the development of tourism. On the one hand, metropolisation implies the increase of private investments that contribute to reshaping the urban landscape. On the other hand, the development of the tourism industry pushed the authorities to think of ways to value places of interest, in order to attract visitors. These trends constitute a first step towards urban heritage thinking.

Clément Musil

Located at 190 Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai Street, this villa in a dilapidated state is sandwiched between two towers (photo by Clément Musil).

TODAY, THE OUTCOMES of the heritage preservation policies are, however, contrasted between Hanoi and HCMC. Though both cities have urban heritage assets to value, especially traditional, religious and colonial heritage, the capital city Hanoi has received much more attention from the Government. The trailing situation in HCMC allows for the exploration of what urban heritage in Vietnam is today, and how to consider and preserve it. To address these issues, this paper gives three different stakeholders concerned by urban heritage policies in HCMC the opportunity to deliver their viewpoint.

The viewpoint of an international cooperation stakeholder
Fanny Quertamp (Co-director of PADDI-HCM City Urban Development Management Support Centre),[1] interviewed by Clément Musil.

In 2010, UNESCO inscribed Hanoi's Imperial Citadel on its World Heritage list. Prior to that, numerous international organisations, namely Japanese and French bilateral cooperations, and especially the French decentralised cooperation of the city of Toulouse and the Île-de-France Region (Paris metropolitan area), had conducted joint projects with the Hanoian authorities to identify and preserve remarkable architecture and specific neighbourhoods. In HCMC, however, no international institutional organisations besides your own (PADDI) are engaged in the urban heritage field. How do you explain the singular position of your institute?

Originally, the cooperation between the Lyon metropolitan area, Rhône-Alpes Region (France) and HCMC, of which PADDI is today an operational instrument, started in the early 1990s and was initiated by urban heritage issues. At that time, the Lyon metropolitan area was providing technical support to the city to launch its first heritage inventory. Further to a request from HCMC's technical departments, and since 2010, PADDI provides specific expertise concerning inventory methods as well as the drawing up of urban heritage preservation policies and tools.

There are great differences between Hanoi, Huế, and Hội An on one hand, and HCMC on the other, regarding their historical and architectural heritage. There are also differences concerning the measures adopted by the central and the local governments to preserve urban heritage. Hanoi is the capital of the country with a broad history; the city celebrated its millennium in 2010. Huế was the imperial capital of the Nguyễn dynasty from the early 19th century and Hội An is a harbour that foreign sailors have visited since the 17th century. The urban fabric of these cities has been shaped by their administrative and political functions and also by external influences that they absorbed.

HCMC, which was renamed after the reunification and was initially composed of two urban cores, namely Saigon and Cholon, started to see urban settlement in the late 18th century. This is why HCMC is today considered to be a young city that welcomed several waves of migration, notably during the Indochina and Vietnam wars (refugees) and nowadays (workers), and is seen as a melting pot with a plural identity. Unlike Hanoi, HCMC cannot claim to have a consistent urban heritage area as the *phố cổ* (old quarter). The old quarter of Hanoi receives particular attention from the Government for being part of the urban heritage that is considered purely Vietnamese without any foreign influence and thus contributes to shaping a national identity. By contrast, HCMC is seen more as a city dedicated to the country's economic development. Its metropolitan area is today the main economic engine of the country as well as the gateway for Foreign Direct Investments. Moreover, its architectural and urban heritage is fragmented and spread out across the urban territory, and the city does not have a vast heritage area or any major iconic cultural buildings.

During the 1990s, HCMC compiled its inventory list as other cities did. Monuments, historical and architectural sites were identified, including buildings inherited from the colonial period. In other cities, however, such inventories led to the adoption of concrete measures (e.g., in 1996, Hanoi approved a preservation plan for the Hoàn Kiếm Lake area and in 1998 the Old Quarter Management Office was created), while in HCMC listed buildings were approved only occasionally (e.g., pagodas and monumental public buildings). Until today, the main target of the authorities is to develop HCMC as an economic hub. However, internally, within the municipal departments, urban heritage becomes an insistent question of debate: how to combine urban and architectural preservation while the economy is booming? Today, those departments do not have any clear and detailed regulation at their disposal to preserve urban heritage, whereas it is disappearing increasingly. This preoccupation was recently put to the forefront of public debate because of the demolition of iconic buildings like the Eden Quarter and several villas inherited from the colonial period, with currently more villas severely threatened by demolition.

Often it is stressed that there is a gap between western and eastern consideration regarding urban heritage. In this field in particular, do your local partners share the same values as you?

Actually, our concern is mostly to support our partners in the implementation of their tasks. Today, on their part, there is a real shift from a cultural and monumental approach to heritage, to a more urban approach. This is particularly a consequence of the involvement of different institutional partners. This shift is promising with regard to the preservation of buildings as well as authentic neighbourhoods. Among our partners, the Department of Culture, for instance, has a 'monumental' approach to urban heritage. It isolates the building's historic and aesthetic value without considering its surroundings and the dialogue that a building has with its urban environment. In 2009, however, the city approved a decision to produce a revised inventory of existing villas built before 1975, putting the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture in charge. This Department pushes to refine the concept of heritage, going beyond the building and its monumentality, and focusing on the relationship with the urban environment. Today, it is precisely in this aspect that PADDI assists the Department, notably to support the development of a methodology of the inventory work.

Currently, it is a major challenge to overcome the 'monumental' heritage approach. The value of a monument is not only linked to its history and its authenticity, but also to its contribution to the urban identity. In addition, there is a real preoccupation concerning a wide acceptation about heritage such as urban landscapes, or urban infrastructure such as canals and river banks. Adopting a broader sense of urban heritage is also in line with the definitions set by UNESCO in 2011 regarding historic urban landscape.

Although there is real effort and willingness to give meaning to the urban heritage as a whole, local authorities lack the tools to assess, define, classify and regulate urban heritage. PADDI is today supporting the authorities in developing new inventory tools, which will enable them to adopt new and more comprehensive regulations to preserve architectural and urban heritage in HCMC.

The viewpoint of a local expert
Nguyễn Trọng Hòa (High-ranking official from Ho Chi Minh City, former director of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning and former director of the HIDS-Ho Chi Minh City Institute for Development Studies), interviewed by Clément Musil and translated by Đỗ Phương Thúy.

In the context of Ho Chi Minh City's rapid urbanisation, what does the notion of urban heritage mean for the municipality?

Whereas Ho Chi Minh City and other cities in Vietnam are developing rapidly, the notion of urban heritage is still under discussion and remains controversial. Currently, among the local and central authorities there is no consensus regarding this notion and there is clearly a lack of definition. For instance, some issues remain concerning the pool of villas built in HCMC before 1975, such as how to even determine the year of construction, because some villas have been modified and divided many times by the occupants, mostly after the reunification of the country.

As HCMC is driven by fast economic growth, the will persists to make room for modernity, which means replacing old buildings with modern ones. As preserving historic and architectural heritage is today a wish of the municipality, it is essential to extend the notion of heritage from a single building to its geo-

A ‘trial and error’ approach for Ho Chi Minh City

graphical location. Urban heritage should not be reduced to an individual construction, but must include its context and other features, such as gardens, fences, trees, as well as landscapes, including the surrounding canals and river banks, and even the whole neighbourhood with its ‘immaterial’ heritage. But above all, it is necessary to emphasise that the urban heritage issue is first of all a matter of preservation that excludes demolition.

Today, even though Vietnam has a heritage code, its application is complicated. It is especially difficult to enforce the law for private buildings. Classifying a public building, despite it being a time-consuming process, remains feasible because the city’s technical departments can access the plot and the archives (when they exist), and implement surveys. When the land belongs to a private owner or an organisation such as the Army, conducting an assessment becomes a real challenge. And in the case of private residential edifices, it is difficult to convince the owners and to involve them in the preservation process. From a private owner or developer perspective, because land values in the inner city are so high, it brings more benefits to demolish a villa and build a high-rise, rather than to preserve it.

Until now, what has been done by the municipality regarding preservation policies? And why does urban heritage today appear as a critical issue for the city authorities?

Until the early 1990s urban heritage was untouched. For instance, only a few villas were demolished, and most of them were only partially modified. Since 1990, with the economic take-off, the municipality needed land to attract foreign investors and to produce new buildings such as office towers or luxurious hotels to generate profit. That is when the first villas located on attractive plots started to disappear. As this economic pressure increased, the first awareness from the authorities occurred. In 1998, with the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the city, several architectural inventories were conducted. However, the detailed inventory concerning urban and architectural heritage has never been formally approved and turned into regulation; also part of this work has been lost.

From the early 2000s, the economic pressure was so strong that the urban and architectural heritage started to be seriously affected. Informally, the issue of heritage preservation was pushed into the background, and priority was given to the economic development. Not only was heritage damaged, but the work of researchers was ‘badmouthed’. The physical impacts of this property development became evident in the city. The number of destroyed villas increased sharply and this became too ‘visible’. That triggered the kick-start of a second period of urban heritage conservation efforts.

Since 2009 a new inventory has been in progress. Its purpose is not directly to classify but to identify in detail the urban heritage content. However, the city lacks methodology. This is why PADDI is today supporting the municipality in this task. The purpose of this inventory is not only preser-vation, but also to provide a tool to the city departments to regulate and manage urban heritage assets on the city scale. Unfortunately, progress is slow. Local experts and foreign colleagues undergo miscommunications. Not everything old will be preserved; it is likely that only exceptional buildings will be preserved as they are. Other villas, less remarkable, will be conserved due to their landscape assets, but their functions will change, as will their interiors. While the city departments try to design better regulations, villas continue to be demolished and the assets of the ancient *Perle de L’Extrême Orient* slowly disappear. Today if a building is not classified, nothing prevents its owner from demolishing it.

The viewpoint of a foreign historian

“From the Heart. How the memories inhabited by Saigon’s cityscape are being erased”, by Philippe Peycam (Director of the International Institute for Asian Studies).

“If you fire at the Past with the violence of the guns, it will fire back at you with canons.” It was with these words, borrowed by “an author from Daghestan”, that the famous southern historian Sơn Nam (1926-2008) concluded his contribution to a book celebrating Ho Chi Minh City’s multifaceted heritages.[2] Sơn Nam, like other contemporary intellectuals from the South, knew the importance of heritage as material incarnations of popular collective memories, whether these memories invoked painful or happy moments. ‘Collective memories as connections to a local place’ is perhaps the most democratic definition of the always ambivalent notion of heritage. Southern Vietnamese intellectuals like Sơn Nam strove to keep localised genealogies alive, drawing influence from Địa chí, the traditional Vietnamese literary genre of local monographs, giving life to people and stories of the past, of a hamlet, a ‘country’, a region, and by extension, a city, however miscellaneous and interwoven that local past might be. It is the southern Saigon spirit and its mix of contradictory emotions and imaginations – including political ones – that these authors and their readers sought to preserve and transmit to the millions of Saigonese, old and newcomers.

This visceral attachment to the land (and water ways), and its multiple layers of histories, echoes the presence of the early Khmers (Saigon was once called Prey Nokor), the early Vietnamese *(người kinh)* and Chinese *(người hoa)* settlers, the marks and scars left by later groups including the French, the Americans, the new Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants, but also followers of the Buddhist, Caodai, Catholic, Evangelist, Hoa-Hao and Muslim faiths, the Chams, the Indians, the Hindus, the post-1975 Vietnamese returnees, the new northern Vietnamese migrants, etc.

Somehow, this need to nurture a distinctive Southern – Saigonese – way to be Vietnamese has been encapsulated in the words and acts of two revered former southern communist revolutionary figures from the first and second liberation wars: Trần Văn Giàu (1911-2010), an early anticolonial activist and historian, and Trần Bạch Đằng (1926-2007), the leader of the Saigon resistance against the Republic of Vietnam and its American backers. For as long as these two figures of modern Vietnam were alive they continued to hold high the flame of a distinct southern Vietnamese cultural integrity and a desire to locate Saigon in its historical continuity. When I was a doctoral student in Saigon in the 1990s, I learned how these two major local figures, however complicated their past political actions had been, stood as protectors of free-minded southern intellectuals like Sơn Nam, and how they continuously supported micro initiatives aimed at uncovering and rehabilitating bits and pieces of the Saigon historical human puzzle. They stood firm, though they often found themselves powerless to oppose mindless urban projects put forward by the bureaucrats who controlled the city.

Already in the 1990s, blatantly destructive projects were put forward. For instance, the neoclassical French-built Peugeot building behind the Cathedral, from where Vietnam’s Independence was proclaimed on 2 September 1945 (by Giàu), was demolished by a coalition of interests involving the South Korean Chaebol Posco; and a Singapore-Malaysian investor hoping to build a modern high-rise building in the historical heart of the city (today the Sheraton Hotel) undermined the foundations of the adjacent 1930s Indian-built central Mosque. The ends of Giàu and Đằng’s public lives were increasingly devoted to expressing public outcry against nonsensical projects that one after the other wiped out parts of old Saigon. Regrettably, they were already too frail to pick a fight when the banks of the Chợ Lớn (Chinatown) Canal were bereft of their original – sometimes three-stories high – Chinese shop houses, the highest in Southeast Asia.

More was to come and the two men were no longer present when a new wave of unprecedented attacks on the historical fabric of the city was recently unleashed, such as the shady Vincom real estate company project that pulled down the Eden cinema complex and its surrounding block on Đồng Khởi Street, a block that housed more than 200 families, rich and poor, including the legendary Givral café. Surely, there should have been ways to keep elements of this central memory-rich landscape of the city. The speculative interests of Vincom, allied with the murky practices of the city’s leaders, sought another path. A few months later, the 213 Đồng Khởi Street building, the first concrete-built Art Deco high-rise in the Indochinese peninsula, still in good condition, was also wiped out along with a public park where so many of the city’s couples once spent their afternoons on a public bench in the shade of almost fifty-metre high trees. These landmarks of Saigon’s public popular culture have been demolished and replaced by half-empty shopping malls where exclusive luxury stores have replaced what were essentially public spaces – spaces where everyone was entitled to live and share the city. This list can easily be extended as no local memory-charged urban spaces have been spared.

Today, the old naval construction complex of Ba Son, the most important site of anticolonial industrial struggle in the collective memory of the country, owned by the Vietnamese army, will soon be replaced by yet again another exclusive, mega-project with a huge footprint that will have no connection with the rest of Saigon’s urban landscape. In the words of urban sociologist Saskia Sassen, these mega-projects not only “raise the density of the city, they actually de-urbanise it.” What we now see is a systematic process of corporatisation of the metropolis’s urban landscape, which will “inevitably kill much urban tissue: little streets and squares, density of street-level shops and modest offices, and so on.”[3]

Despite punctual efforts carried out by members of the municipality’s technical departments to classify elements of urban heritage, the questions that remain for everyone who love(d?) this city are: why such a blindness on the part of the leaders? Can this be explained by a disconcerting lack of historical and cultural education? Or is it just basic, mediocre greed and collusion with big national and international corporate interests at the expense of all other concerns? Or else, is there some naïve idea of ‘progress’ in their mind to think that Đồng Khởi Street should become the Orchard Road of Saigon – with, like so many leaders of Asia, a blind admiration for the top-down corporatised Singaporean state model?

In the Vietnamese context, one thing is certain: this state of mind does not just betray a surrender of responsibility to the forces of global corporate interests vis-à-vis the people the Party represents, it also serves a political purpose. It connects with a past when Saigon dared to be more than a simple economic emporium for the country, when the city held the potential to represent an alternative way ‘to be and feel Vietnamese’. It leads indeed to the effective annihilation of the spirit of a rebellious city and its people; a city where people no longer are allowed to have roots and attachments. A city divided between those who have and those who don’t, of transient dwellers, of salary-men/women and consumers, of refugees in their own city; a corporate de-urbanisation in the service of a cultural erasure of Vietnam’s South. Is this what awaits Vietnam as a whole, forty years after winning her unification at the price of millions of lives?

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1 Founded in 2006, PADDI is an innovative decentralised cooperation project between the Lyon metropolitan area and the Rhône-Alpes Region (France), and Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam). Under the Ho Chi Minh City municipality supervision, its goal is to assist the city’s technical agencies in various fields of urban management.

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3 Sassen, S. 2015. ‘Who owns our cities – and why this urban takeover should concern us all’, The Guardian, 24/11/2015.

Nam Mansion located at 110-112 Võ Văn Tần Street is one of the largest colonial residences in the city (Courtesy of PADDI).

Worshipping ancestors in a peri-urban context

Beyond the visible development of its built environment, it is enlightening to read the current socio-spatial evolutions of a place through the lens of domestic and cultural urban practices. For example, the way in which different categories of urban dwellers organise their ancestor worship is a revealing object of study, standing at the crossroads between geographical and anthropological approaches. This perspective offers an intimate understanding of the ways in which urban dwellers – in their growing diversity – negotiate urban mutations on a daily and private basis. Focusing on ancestor worship is also an enlightening way to appreciate the settlement of new populations in the area, both in its reality and symbolically, as both the living and the dead migrate in the process.

Ngô Thị Thu Trang

A heterogeneous district in the making

Bình Tân district is one of the areas that best illustrate the steady pace of urban development and the polymorphous mutations of Ho Chi Minh City today. Still classified as a rural district *(huyện)* until the year 2003, Bình Tân is now the most recent urban district *(quận)* of the Southern Vietnamese metropolis. The area is a strategic gateway between HCMC and the Mekong delta region. Its location is embodied by the presence of major infrastructures such as highways and transportation nodes – in particular *bến xe miền tây,* one of the most important metropolitan bus stations – and rapid industrial development over the last ten years. This urban context involves high migration rates and radical mutations of the district's spatial organisation. The population of Bình Tân district increased by 60% between 2004 and 2012 (today reaching about 630,000 inhabitants), and about 50% of the population growth is linked to rural migrations, mainly from the Southern Vietnamese provinces.[1]

Once mainly inhabited by rural families who owned typical low-rise detached houses with small gardens *(nhà vườn),* Bình Tân district today welcomes numerous new housing developments, mainly dedicated to the urban middleclass. Furthermore, the growing industrial zones of the area attract many migrant workers, on a more temporary basis. These dwellers often stay in collective dormitories or rent individual rooms within existing homes. Thus, this migratory trend leads to social stratification and spatial reorganisation in the district. The current inhabitants of a once quite homogenous rural district are becoming progressively more diverse, now experiencing varying attachments to the district. The original dwellers relate Bình Tân to the land of their family ancestors; new inhabitants tend to consider the place as a recent fruitful investment; and migrant workers see this district as nothing more than a temporary and non-specific location. The appropriation of local space is thus quite different from one category of dwellers to another.

The evolution of the most fundamental ritual act in Vietnam [2]

Ancestor worship is considered to be "the most fundamental ritual act in Vietnam" and its practice transcends the different religious affiliations that exist in the country.[3] This practice is not only a domestic ritual dedicated to the dead, but it is also a way to place every individual within a community, through the idea of lineage and kinship. This practice contributes to the production of strong social networks, by connecting places of birth and places of death. It honours not only the family ancestors on a regular basis, but it also stresses and reaffirms the family's links with the so-called 'ancestor land' *(quê nhà /đất hương hỏa).*[4] With the recent urbanisation trend and intensification of migration, the production of such networks faces new challenges, but continues to adapt.

This worship works on different temporalities. On a daily basis, it consists of placing flowers, incense and fruit on the ancestors' altar. This small domestic altar is present in nearly every Vietnamese home. In addition to this daily practice, ancestor worshipping is put on stage on special dates, such as the first, second, fifth and tenth anniversary of a direct (patrilineal) ancestor's death *(ngày giỗ).* On these occasions, a bigger ceremony is organised, to which the family at large, and even neighbours, are invited. This time and money-consuming ceremony is an occasion for the family to reaffirm its anchorage within its neighbourhood and to show its wealth and its material success. Depending on the family religion, these two main temporalities of worship can be complemented by a third, which consists of celebrating the 1st and 15th day of each lunar month. This Buddhist practice is performed inside the house, around the ancestors' altar and does not involve neighbours.[5]

Dealing with ancestor worship in a peri-urban context

Ancestor worship tends to take less time and occupy less space in urban areas today, whatever the category of urban population is concerned. Even indigenous dwellers tend to worship their ancestors in a less conventional manner than before. The most obvious changes with regard to the death anniversaries include the following: the altar has become smaller and simpler, and its votive objects less precious, although its location is still carefully chosen according to *feng shui (Phong Thủy)* precepts; while historically celebrated by sons in the context of a patrilineal cultural context, these ceremonies are now equally performed by daughters and daughters-in-law; urban dwellers in Bình Tân district no longer feel it to be appropriate to invite neighbours to the ceremonies; and a lack of space in the urban context means that ceremonies are becoming increasingly modest, and more often than not are held indoors.

Mr. Long, an elderly original inhabitant of Bình Tân district, explained that he sticks to some traditional rules, but tries to adapt others: "Every year we have to organise the *ngày giỗ,* but the way we are doing it is partially disconnected from our previous countryside practices. Only few guests are invited. We maintain the worship just to make sure that our kids do not forget our custom within the family". The *ngày giỗ* is still considered an occasion for a family gathering, where adults can teach children how to worship the ancestors, but it is less and less a broader social and neighbourhood event. Only close neighbours are invited, those who have been family friends for a long while. Mr. Long revealed that he would be reluctant to invite his new neighbours, those who recently moved to the area. The sense of collectiveness in an increasingly socially diverse area is challenged and thus gradually recomposed. The family cell has become the more appropriate unit with whom to perform worshipping rituals, reflecting the diminishing effect of the neighbourly community as a social and cultural structuring factor.

Not only the old, but also the new inhabitants and owners of Bình Tân's tube houses display a high degree of simplification in their worshipping practices, and most of the families never invite their neighbours. They wouldn't want to 'bother' them and think it inappropriate in an urban context. Mrs Dau, a new dweller, of an advanced age: "I usually worship the anniversary of my husband's death and my parents-in-laws' anniversary. However, next year, I will organise these celebrations together on one single day and I am not sure I will invite a lot of people. My children are too busy to help, and so are my neighbours. Here it is not like in the countryside; if we do a celebration party, it will disturb the neighbours." The organisation of a single worship day for all the family ancestors has become a matter of convenience and appropriate social behaviour in an urban context.

A lack of space in the urban context may also play a role in the simplification of the worshipping practices. Without gardens or courtyards, and legal permits required for making use of public spaces, death anniversary ceremonies are increasingly often kept indoors, and thus celebrated with a reduced number of guests.

Migrant workers, who have recently settled in Bình Tân, generally continue to participate in ceremonies held in their rural hometowns, where worshipping remains quite a traditional practice. For celebrations, notably death anniversaries, large numbers of kin including those living in town are invited, together with people from the neighbourhood. Mrs Nga explained: "For every anniversary of one of my husband's ancestors, we travel back to his hometown. It is very tiring because it involves inviting our kin, and the neighbours also. We have to prepare the celebration a few days in advance. This means baking cakes, preparing the chicken and all the others dishes for the guests. Very demanding and tiring! Especially because we come from far away now ... it requires a great deal of organisation and leaving our workplace for a few days as well." Despite her complaints, Mrs Nga still cares a lot about the proper organisation of her family's ancestor worship and she explained that Bình Tân district is in no way her 'heartland'; to worship her ancestors in HCMC would make no sense. Even though some migrants have now been settled in Bình Tân district for many years they still don't embody their 'sense of belonging' through a too meaningful ancestor worship.

As a result, peri-urban areas such as Bình Tân district can be seen as a laboratory of transitional practices in the Vietnamese urban context. Family celebrations are still organised, but in a simplified manner because of the practical lack of space in an urban environment, an overall decrease in the links between the place of abode and the so-called ancestor lands, and a diminishing significance of belonging to a neighbourhood in an urban context.

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Below: Worshipping ancestors in the home of a new dweller in Bình Tân District (HCMC). Located on the third floor, the ancestors' room is dedicated to ceremonies, but is also used as a temporary storage room (courtesy of Clément Musil).

Wedding gift-giving: a glimpse on evolving sociability practices

The strong urban dynamics that have been occurring in Vietnam over the past decades have led to a reshuffling of social practices, especially in the field of social exchanges and ritual activities. This paper gives a glimpse at evolving urban sociability through the lens of gift-giving practices during wedding ceremonies, both in Hanoi and in a rural commune of the Red River Delta, named Giao Tân.

Emmanuel Pannier

Above: 'Modern style' gift during a wedding ceremony in a village in Nam Định province (2008). Courtesy of Emmanuel Pannier.

'Non-commercial flows' in Vietnam

Social exchanges, also called 'non-commercial flows', are understood as transactions (of goods and services) occurring outside the market and state channels. Because they are based on personal ties and affect social relationships, they also constitute significant indicators of sociability; in this case we are looking at contemporary Vietnam. 'Non-commercial flows' encompass a wide variety of transactions, in various guises, with different ways of transference. Underlying this diversity, there are nonetheless common principles.

A 'typical system of non-commercial flows'[1] can be defined as a ceremonial gift-giving system based on mutual aid *(giúp đỡ),* reciprocity *(có đi có lại)* and moral indebtedness *(nợ; tình nghĩa)*. The system is embedded in strong moral and social obligations that bind the participants' relationships. As far as they fulfil economic and social functions, social exchanges widely contribute to the production/reproduction process of communities at local levels. Hybridisation of practices and traditions surrounding wedding ceremonies in the Red River Delta is a meaningful indicator to apprehend the evolution of society, especially in urban contexts.

According to a 2005 survey held in rural provinces (both in the Red River province of *Bắc Ninh* and in the Mekong Delta province of Long An), the expenses related to wedding gifts represent an average of 13% of a family's income.[2] A study conducted in Hanoi indicates that respondents participate in an average of 25 celebrations a year and spend 6% of their budget on gift-giving.[3] Furthermore, many informants complained about these expenses, especially during the wedding season, from October to March. A quarter of respondents said they have to borrow money in order to fulfil their financial obligation for ceremonies. Even though city-dwellers attend fewer celebrations than village-dwellers, social exchanges remain intense in an urban context. However, in contrast with countryside practices, many transformations can be observed. The study of gifts and transfers during weddings celebrated in Hanoi provide important clues to these changes.[4]

Unpacking wedding gift-giving practices in an urbanising society

Despite the social heterogeneity of urban dwellers in Hanoi, some general patterns concerning wedding gift-giving practices are identified. Among these trends, when attending a wedding in the Capital city, guests commonly bring a cash-gift in an envelope and put it in the appropriate box before entering the ceremony room. These gifts are called *mừng,* which means 'to congratulate'. Donors carefully write their name on the envelope and specify to whom they dedicate it: the parents or the married couple. In return, they will receive similar cash-gifts, generally of a higher amount, when they themselves organise such a ceremony. The monetisation of wedding gifts runs parallel with a broader monetisation process of non-commercial transactions in cities, brought about by the urban economical context and needs. Although monetisation of gift-giving also occurs in the rural commune of Giao Tân, it happened earlier in Hanoi, where it is also much more widespread.

During weddings in the Giao Tân rural area, even if gifts in kind still occur, most of *mừng*-gifts are in cash, but without any envelopes or boxes. The name of the donor and the amount of money are directly registered on a gift-list held by a family member. The transaction occurs in public, unlike in Hanoi where *mừng* are delivered within an envelope, reflecting the primacy of the 'bilateral relationship', without many external social controls; in rural areas, the bilateral relationship is also significant but much more deeply embedded in local society, where reputation and dignity *(face)* are at stake.

Other distinctions between rural and urban weddings highlight the specific feature of urban sociability. In the countryside, villagers usually organise the wedding ceremony at home, and the bride's and groom's personal celebrations are hosted separately. But in Hanoi, since the 1990s, new trends have appeared. Many more ceremonies are hosted in restaurants and even at luxurious wedding venues, if the family can afford it. At such events, the two families often gather their personal guests at the same banquet place. Consequently, wedding preparations are not performed by relatives and neighbours for free anymore, within a reciprocal scheme called *giúp đỡ* (mutual aid). People who choose to rely on service providers in the market instead of their relatives argue that contractual relationships "are more reliable and controllable than personal relationships, which are based on sentiment."[5] By contrast, in Giao Tân, even if some villagers share this opinion, most of them continue to lean on personal networks, both for economic reasons and for social obligations.

These variations illustrate urban social trends where market exchanges are being substituted for non-commercial transactions and where impersonal-contractual relationships are – in some circumstances – preferred to emotion-based bonds framed by strong moral and social obligation. City dwellers tend to emancipate themselves from moral debts-bonds, which are a central ingredient in sealing social ties in rural areas.

Consumption and wedding ceremonies in Hanoi

The increasing consumption of commercial services for weddings, linked to the increasing standards of living in cities, leads to higher expenses for urban weddings than rural ones. My survey in Giao Tân indicates that wedding expenditures ranged from USD 250 to 1,000 between 1998 and 2009. A previous case study of a middleclass family wedding in Hanoi in 1996 revealed that a total of USD 2,000 was spent to host 800 guests.[6] Nowadays in Hanoi, organising a banquet in a 4-star hotel costs a minimum of USD 25 per guest; renting a place and hiring catering services for a medium quality banquet costs an average of USD 100 for a table of 6. Taking the average income of urban dwellers into account (USD 150/month in 2012), these amounts are substantial investments. A lot of people have to borrow money in order to hold a worthy wedding celebration.

Wedding costs increase in an urban context, but so too do the value of the gifts. *Mừng*-gifts are viewed as a contribution to the event. Thus, if organisers spend more for the ceremony, so do guests. The amount of the gift varies according to the closeness of the relationship, but also according to the place and type of ceremony. For a 'normal relationship' *(quan hệ không thân thiết),* not an intimate relation (i.e., colleague, neighbour, distant kin), guests will give between USD 15 and 25 at a wedding in Hanoi; close friends and relatives will give a minimum of USD 35. In the countryside the average gift amount is less than half of this.

Organising a wedding or being invited to a wedding in Hanoi can definitely be a significant financial burden. This explains the Government's attempts to contain the increase of wedding costs,[7] especially by forbidding lavish banquets, by limiting the number of guests, and by discouraging prestige competition or status display. Locally, the Hanoi authorities even issued a decision (No. 07/2012/QD-UBND) prohibiting ostentatious excesses and indirectly targeting Party members.

In Giao Tân, except for when children migrate and organise their own weddings in a city, wedding costs are generally covered by the parents. Helping their children to start their lives is a strong moral duty that leads to many transactions from parents to children, and thus to strong moral debts for children who are expected to reciprocate when necessary. In Hanoi, more and more couples finance their weddings themselves, especially when they are in a better economic situation than their parents. These changes reflect broader shifts in child-parent relationships in an urbanising context, where reciprocal duties have been modified. The moral and legal responsibility of parents to support their children decreases, and obligations for children to take care of their parents when they get old, or when a parent dies, may also decline.

Gift-giving practices as a window into urban sociability

Looking at wedding gift-giving practices both in Hanoi and in a rural commune of the Red River Delta provides a glimpse of sociability changes that occur within a fast urbanising context. Principles of 'non-commercial flows' are quite similar in both environments, but their expressions present distinctive features. The control of local society on the fulfilment of obligations is much stronger in the countryside than in Hanoi, where bilateral relationships, contractual relationships and utilitarian consideration seem to occupy a more important place. The practical utility of gift-giving tends to override its social function. Although the reality is more subtle, in general we can state that the flow of financial resources sustain social relationships in the countryside, while in Hanoi, social relationships sustain resource flows. But, as long as state and market regulations (i.e., contractual, impersonal and formal relationships and exchanges based on law) cannot produce enough trust to ensure cooperation and are not sufficient to support the production/reproduction of society, 'non-commercial flows' and personal relationship networks remain central issues for urban dwellers.

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4 Most of the empirical data about rural practices of gift-giving has been collected during in-depth qualitative surveys conducted between 2006 and 2014 in Giao Tân, a rural commune in Nam Định province. The weddings in Hanoi are informed by other scholars' cases studies, combined with my own observations and informal talks about wedding gift-giving in Hanoi between 2006 and 2016.

5 Belk, R. & Thuc-Doan Thi Nguyen. 2012. "Vietnamese Weddings: From Marx to Market", *Journal of macromarketing,* 32(1):109-120.

6 *Ngô Ngọc Thắng & Mai Văn Hai. 1997. "Về nghi thức tiệc mặn và lệ mừng qua khảo sát một lễ cưới gần dây ở Hà Nội"* [About banquet ceremony and *mừng-gift* practices through a wedding in Hanoi], *Tạp chí Khoa học xã hội* [Review of the social science faculty], 3(59):60-66.

7 Malarney, S. 2002. *Culture, Ritual, and Revolution in Vietnam,* London: Routledge Curzon.